

LEV KASSIL

The queen
OF
SNOWS

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

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ЛЕВ КАСИЛЬ
ХРУСТАЛЬНЫЙ КУБОК
(ХОД БЕЛОЙ КОРОЛЕВЫ)

SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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"... I AM AWARE THAT SOMETHING MORE MIGHT BE MADE OF THIS EPISODE, BUT I PREFER TO TELL IT AS IT WAS CURRENT AT SANDY BAR—IN THE GULCHES AND BAR-ROOMS—WHERE ALL SENTIMENT WAS MODIFIED BY A STRONG SENSE OF HUMOUR."

BRET HARTE



P R O L O G U E

There is hardly a newspaperman who has not at one time or another attempted to write a novel or some other work of fiction. Therefore, I was not in the least surprised when one day my friend Yevgeny Carichev confronted me with a bulky manuscript and rather diffidently asked me to read it and to recommend it for publication if I found it worth-while.

When I took it, I little suspected that Carichev's manuscript would deprive me of peace of mind, that I would have to undertake a long journey in order to solve some of its puzzles and that I would finish the story for the author who had ended it rather abruptly. And it never occurred to me that that harmless, neatly typed manuscript would urge me to renew contact with the world of skiing, a world once very close to me, taking me back into the nipping frost to watch skiing meets, to see the boisterous winds fanning the Olympic flame and fluttering the little flags along the ski tracks.

Carichev's manuscript, I regret to say, lay for a long time neglected on my desk. As a matter of fact, being very busy, I had completely for-

gotten about it, and the author was apparently too shy to remind me. But one day, as I was going over some papers on my desk, my eye fell upon it and, feeling compunctious, I at once gave the manuscript my attention.

I had known Carichev, whose pen-name was Y. Car, for many long years. We had once worked on the same big Moscow daily, and even then he had the reputation of being a first-class reporter and correspondent, always on the spot where important news was to be got. More than once during the war I ran into him at the front lines. His reports were always so fresh and accurate one could almost smell gunpowder in them. I had always liked him for his modesty and pleasant sense of humour. But there were moments when he was unbelievably shy.

Opposites attract, they say, and Carichev, who thought himself awkward and unprepossessing, was attracted to persons of athletic build, grace and poise. It was natural, therefore, that he should crave the company of sportsmen. Their exuberant spirits and the easy camaraderie existing among them were particularly to his taste. Sportsmen, on their part, thought him a fine fellow and were proud to have him for a friend. Moreover, his vivid and forceful manner of reporting sports and genuinely professional knowledge of them won him the admiration of all sportsmen.

He himself had never gone in seriously for any kind of sports because of his "accursed" shyness. He was convinced for some reason that he looked his worst in a sports outfit. He was so terribly sensitive on this point—and that sensitiveness increased with the years—that he thought he couldn't don a pair of skates or skis without people poking fun at him.

But nothing could prevent Carichev from being an ardent sports fan, a friend of all champions, and a troubadour of the glory of sports. He was a very popular sports radio commentator, especially winter sports,

so eloquent, moving, convincing, fiery, one would never have thought him shy.

Carichev's novel, as might have been expected, dealt with sports, with skiing, his favourite sport, at that.

"I've written a sort of short novel," he said timidly as he handed the folder with the manuscript to me. "Take a look at it if you can spare the time. It's about some of our girl skiers, or, to be exact, about one of them. The story will probably remind you of things you've read in newspapers. It's based on some of my reporting—I got an idea I could make a story out of it. I don't suppose I've succeeded. Still I'd like you to read it. But on one condition—you must tell me perfectly frankly what you think of it."

When I finally got down to it, I read the story and then reread it.

There were a number of puzzling things in it, a sort of aura of mystery, I was intrigued.

There were, too, certain incongruities of style. For example, having set out to tell the story in the first person with himself as an observer of all the events, the author suddenly, without a word of explanation, proceeded to describe episodes which he could not have possibly witnessed. I also thought the story was overburdened with technical details and figures.

Hence there were the puzzling points that needed clarifying and bits here and there that I thought should be deleted.

The thing to do was to get in touch with Carichev. But that was easier said than done. As in former times, he was always on the go. One day I would be reading his accounts of new developments in the uncultivated areas of Kazakhstan. And then before I knew it he was out with a party of land surveyors on the shores of the Angara. Some time later he would be broadcasting about a skating meet in the town of Kirov and then he would be off to a North Pole drifting station. When finally I managed

to get him in Moscow he told me hurriedly over the telephone that I had literally "caught him by the tail." He was on his way to the airfield, he said, to make a plane leaving in an hour for Italy to cover the winter Olympics.

"Well, have you read the thing?" he asked anxiously. "I bet you think it's pretty bad. You needn't spare my feelings. I can take it. You know what the old peasant said when he fell out of his sleigh and his horse had run off, 'I wish somebody would give me one in the neck so I could get up and walk.'"

"I've no intention of slamming you," I said. "But I do want a serious talk with you."

"Is it really very poor?"

"Not at all, it makes good reading, quite gripping in parts, I should say. But there are things that seem superfluous—"

"Throw them out, every word that's not needed. You'll forgive me, but I can't talk now. I'm in a hurry."

"Wait a minute," I shouted. "You've got things that are not clear."

"Not clear?" Carichev repeated. "Then my style must be faulty. I didn't invent anything. I took it all from life and it was pretty clear. Thanks anyhow for reading the thing and calling me up. Got to go now, the car's waiting. Say, I've an idea, why not come along with me?" Carichev said quite casually as though inviting me for a stroll in the park. "You were keen on sports once yourself, weren't you, and did some pretty good sports reporting. Come along to the Olympics in Italy—for old times' sake. You'll see something you may never see again in your life."

"I'm sure but . . ."

"Well, what's the word? You're getting stale. Don't hesitate. And, by the way, I hope to write a new ending to my novel. I can now see things developing that way. And if you come you'll realize how clear everything really is. Well, see you in Italy!"

It would be wrong to suppose that this telephone conversation alone was responsible for my finally going to the Olympic Games in Italy. To do justice to Carichev's reproaches I had myself for some time past been thinking that I was getting too tied down to one place. Of late I had not attended any of the big sports events which in previous years I would not have missed for anything in the world. From the very first pages Carichev's novel reminded me of our common interest in sports. And now Yevgeny's going off to the Olympics in Italy, where the world's renowned sportsmen and sports fans were gathering, got me all excited. I was both eager to attend the event and to learn the answers to the things that had puzzled me in Carichev's novel.

Soon afterwards I was on my way to Italy as a tourist and simultaneously as a correspondent of one of our daily newspapers. At the bottom of my suitcase lay Carichev's manuscript. I had edited it slightly, deleting tedious details of a technical nature, but making no stylistic changes.

And here it is—the story as it is told by Carichev in the manuscript he called *The Crystal Cup*.

THE CRYSTAL CUP

(A novel by Yevgeny Carichev)



CHAPTER 1

"I'M THROUGH FOR GOOD!"

erited Master of Sports? No such person living here!" Stepan Chudinov slammed down the receiver and turned to me. "I hope you see now that I'm quite serious. I'm through for good, I tell you."

"Listen, old man, I wish you'd explain."

The telephone was buzzing again. Chudinov snatched the receiver.

"I've already told you that no such person lives here. What did you say? You want Chudinov? Chudinov speaking.... He was a Merited Master of Sports once but is no more. Is that clear? Forget it!"

Bang went the receiver again. Chudinov rose from the sofa and began pacing the room. I gave him a searching glance which took him in from his prematurely greying temples to his powerful feet. Stepan walked with a light but firm step though he limped slightly on his left foot. We were friends of long standing and I could read him like a book. Stepan, I could see, was in one of his very stubborn moods and to argue with him was a sheer waste of time. Yet the decision he had just taken was too staggering to let it go at that.

"Surely, you're not serious, Stepan?" I asked.

"I am. I tell you again I'm through for good!"

He stopped in front of a china closet with dozens of gold medals, badges, cups, trophies, boxes and other prizes won by Stepan Chudinov, a ski champion who was as well known in Europe as he was in the Soviet Union.

"A lot of drinking gimcracks," he said morosely, "but nothing to drink to today."

He looked gloomily round the room. Upright by his large desk stood a couple of draughtsmen's boards with blueprints. On one of the walls hung beautifully framed pictures of quaint wooden cottages, pavilions and stage platforms. Chudinov was an expert in wooden architecture. Before the war he had designed one of the finest wooden pavilions for the Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow, devoted to forestry and tree-planting. The opposite wall was lined from top to bottom with artistically built book-shelves. Among his many books were the thick gold-backed volumes of *A History of Architecture* and an array of encyclopaedias. This wall with its indented lines of shelves and closely packed volumes was strangely reminiscent of an organ with rows of shining pipes.

A collection of cigarette lighters, neatly arranged, occupied a little shelf just about his desk. Collecting cigarette and other fire lighters was one of Chudinov's hobbies. His collection contained the queerest specimens imaginable. There were German scare pistols—you pressed the trigger and a perfectly harmless blue flame came from the muzzle; the lighting bars of the Polynesians, cartridge lighters of the Civil War period, the popular front-line flint and wick lighters, miniature torches strung on a chain with five-coloured rings—these were souvenirs of the Olympic Games; and a combination fountain pen, compass and cigarette lighter, one of Chudinov's recent acquisitions. Here too were spec-

imens of some very ancient tinder and steel lighters and quaintly carved apocalyptical animals—press the tail and a flame springs from the maw.

But now Stepan Chudinov seemed to have no eyes either for his lighters or his favourite books, or his blueprints. His gaze rested on the wall where from a photograph Chudinov himself, unexcelled ski-runner, champion of many years, looked down upon us—youthful, athletic, smart. This was the Stepan I had known for the last fifteen odd years. Time and again I had sent to Moscow dispatches about his prowess on the ski course and stumbled over the spelling of his name when I cabled my reports from abroad. Over and over again, shielding the microphone from the frosty wind with a cupped mitt, I announced him winner of ski tournaments.

To Chudinov sports was something he could not do without. After a fatiguing day over his designs he had a habit of skiing a few miles in the hilly country round Moscow, returning home refreshed, rejuvenated and in the best of spirits. "After skiing my head is clearer, my senses keener and all my self-confidence returns to me," he would say.

But being of a very ardent nature, putting heart and soul into whatever he did, never sparing himself or resorting to half-measures, Chudinov was inclined to regard skiing as something more than a pastime. When training for an important competition, he would put all his effort and energy towards the achievement of the goal he set himself, make use of every inch of muscle and of every tissue. His zeal knew no bounds. And he was the same in his designing work. Once convinced he was right, there was nothing that could stop him. Some of his associates thought him too blunt, even overbearing at times. Such traits are unforgivable in a coach and teacher of sports.

Stepan was not an easy person to get along with and I knew that well. He was stubborn, preferring to change his place of employment rather than his convictions, even when small matters were at stake.



His enthusiasm carried him to the sites of new towns. He did not mind roughing it, often living for long periods in barracks. I ran into him in Komsomolsk, the new town that sprang up on the River Amur, and in other parts of the country where new settlements, some designed by him, were rising.

And now because of a conceited slip of a girl with a tongue more nimble than legs, Stepan was through with skiing. It was hard to believe that he really meant it. True, as a celebrated skier he had been out of the running for several years already. A bullet wound in his left leg during the war had struck him off the lists of those vying for the U.S.S.R. title which had been his for many years.

Stepan volunteered at the very outset of the war and became commander of a reconnaissance ski detachment. Quite frequently the unit operated behind the enemy's lines and in one of the sallies on the Karelian Isthmus Stepan was wounded. The surgeons did their best, but Stepan was no longer able to stand the strain of long ski runs, his leg often paining badly. Unable to participate in ski meets himself, Chudinov took to training other skiers, dividing his time between his job at a designing bureau and the training grounds.

After his wound he thought of dropping sports altogether—he even stopped attending competitions. But some time passed and by the sports checkered blazer he usually wore he was recognized first among spectators at stadiums and later on the ski course. Sports circles were happy to hear that Chudinov was coaching skiers.

As a coach Chudinov was particularly strict in his relations with the opposite sex, especially with the girls he trained. They found him attractive, but he pretended not to notice this.

There were cases of coaches falling in love with their pupils and marrying them. Chudinov considered such marriages a violation of certain unwritten laws that he had set up for himself. "When on snow, be cold



as snow”—was his maxim. He regarded flirting with trainees as the height of bad taste. It seemed to me that Chudinov was too severe with himself and with others, and that was why he was really a very lonely man.

“I once courted glory for myself, now I’m courting her for others, younger and more fortunate than myself,” he would say in jest.

He remained a bachelor and held himself aloof with women who thought him somewhat ungallant.

“I suppose I’ve missed something in life, old man,” he once said to me, “and here I’m nearing forty, a dangerous age.”

Stepan took a special course in ski training. And with tremendous experience behind him, perseverance and grit, he started out on the new career of coach. Many of the skiers he worked with became famous. Among them

was Alisa Baburina who for three years running held the U.S.S.R. women's ski championship.

And now I had a strong suspicion that Alisa was to blame for everything. A magazine flung open on an armchair carried her photograph—a tall, slender girl with a somewhat haughty lift of the chin. She was holding out a hand for a prize she had won and had an arm round her trainer's shoulder. She was surrounded by reporters, and cheering admirers.

"What are you staring at?" Chudinov who had been pacing the room stopped short at my side as I bent down over the magazine. "You think Alisa is at the bottom of it all? Ridiculous!"

"Isn't she though?"

"Listen, old man, I thought you were smarter than that. Surely you don't seriously think that yesterday's talk at the Sports Committee is responsible for my decision. It's just that the time has come for me to retire, is that clear? I've put all my heart into that coaching job. But it's no use. For three years now Alisa has been showing the same time and not good time at that, not a second less. And there are two great sports events ahead of us—the Annual Winter Sports Tournament and the Olympic Games in Italy. A fine showing we'll make if we're not properly prepared. It upsets me even to think of it. I've had no luck as a coach. No talent along that line, I suppose. Don't interrupt me! I've failed to make her really love skiing. She's a splendid racer but unreliable. Takes herself too much for granted, too cocksure of success and it comes too easily to her, for instance, these things," he waved his hand in the direction of the closet with the prizes. "She thinks the gods will always be good to her. She doesn't take training seriously. Take a trifle like waxing her skis before important ski meets. It's something she leaves to her fans. And that is a hell of a thing to do. A real artist knows how to prime his own canvas, and enjoys doing it, just like a fisherman

loves tarring his boat, or a soldier who won't let anyone but himself clean his rifle. She's been winning championships—but only by the smallest of margins, trusting mostly to luck and to her own recklessness, and that, I must say, she never has lacked. But in a ski race you can't trust to such things alone. The battle you fight to win begins long, long before you start your race."

He was silent for a while. Then, looking sullenly at me, he said, "What the devil! I haven't signed a contract for life to be a coach, have I? I tell you I've had enough of it. There are other things I'm good for. There are my new designs for building cheap and comfortable houses. And you want me to waste my time on such spoilt stuck-ups!"

"Stop grumbling!"

"I'm not grumbling. I'm giving you copy for your paper: 'Engineer Chudinov, ex-ski champion turned coach, resigns and will henceforth devote himself to housing projects.' And that's final. What's more, Engineer Chudinov is leaving town. I've had two splendid offers. Don't know which to take, as a matter of fact. One is a job in Vologda and the other in Zemogorsk, that new mining town in the Urals where there's some tremendous construction going on. They've got all the timber you want. And I'm a specialist in wooden construction. I've written to both places and learned that they intend to use my standard house projects. How's that? But I'm still in two minds which of the offers to accept."

"Go ahead, build all you want, but why drop sports?" I argued.

"I'm fed up," said Chudinov putting his hand edgewise to his throat to show that he was. "A sportsman's like an actor—should know when to stop. And I've been at it too long as it is."

Gripping my elbow, he led me across the room to a large, slightly faded photograph on the wall. It was a picture of Stepan and myself in our younger days. We were both wearing checkered blazers of a



dashing cut with huge football-shaped buttons, ski caps and identical mufflers jauntily knotted under our chins.

"I suppose you remember—that was taken in Switzerland," he said. "We were at the top then. And here is something entirely different. This was the time we were in Karelia." He bent over a large photograph, this time showing us in rough sheepskins and felt boots. We were standing knee-deep in snow and had automatic rifles slung across our chests.

"My last ski run," he said sadly, "and that was where it all ended, the championship, fame and everything."

He stretched himself to his full height and sighed.



My thoughts ran back to the days of the war. Here, I felt, was my chance to speak of something that had long been weighing on my mind and conscience.

"Stepan, why deny it, I know that I am to blame for what had then happened in Karelia. Be a good friend just for once, and let's talk it over."

"Talk what over?" Chudinov was at once on his guard.

"You know as well as I do!"

"Phew!" he whistled. "So you're at it again? Hadn't we decided once and for all not to bring that up again. You gave me your word!"



"I don't care if I did!"

"Start that talk again and you'll fly out of the room."

"Don't be so sure I'll be the one to fly out!"

"Say, old fellow, whom do you think you're talking to? Want me to show you?" He made for me, rolling up his shirt sleeves. "You think I'm no good. Well, you'll see that there is still something of the champion left in me. What'll it be? Catch-as-catch-can or Sambo, choose."

I don't know what methods he used but in an instant I was down and he was on top of me holding my arms and legs in an iron grip.

"Now, are you going to bring that subject up again?"

"I will! Cut out your foolishness. I know full well that it was you who saved my life out there in Karelia."

The front-door bell rang once and then a second time. The second ring was impatient and urgent.

Chudinov leapt to his feet, seized me under the arm-pits, lifted me into the air and set me down in a vertical position.

"That must be Alisa. She'd telephoned she'd come—wants to talk with me. Stupid girl! Does she really think she's at the bottom of it all. It flatters her, I suppose, to think so."

He thrust my hat into my hands, helped me hastily into my coat, and went to open the door.

"All right," I said lowering my voice, "I'll go but I shall not drop that subject."

With an inscrutable look Chudinov said quietly but emphatically, "Now, Yevgeny, I tell you we're not going to return to that subject. My word of honour, if you as much as hint at it again, I'll show you the door."

The front door was flung open and a tall, slim, dark-haired girl in a most becoming toque entered. Everything about her, the tiny toque, the narrow, blue-grey slacks with their meticulous crease, the short, far too fashionable jacket, at once stamped her as one of the *élite* of the sports world. She was perhaps a little too self-assured and showed it. But for all that Alisa Baburina was really a stunning girl and very graceful.

She cast me a look of mild interest as though she had never set eyes on me before. Beautiful, yes! But showing off too much, I thought.

I have often noticed that the less people count in their field, the harder they try to affect the mannerisms and dress that are supposed to hallmark their profession or calling. Long-haired painters in loose blouses are very likely not to possess any talent, and debonair young men in sports outfits when put to the test often turn out to be ninnies. It's not easy to pick out a famous writer by the suit he wears but budding poets—I've been able to tell these a mile away.

It was different with Alisa. Though she dressed like a magazine cover sports star—a little too conspicuously—she was a splendid skier.

Alisa was used from childhood to being the centre of attention. That was something she always hankered after. At school, when only in the third form, she was already up to certain tricks to attract attention. Before a holiday like International Women's Day her classmates collected money to buy some little gift for their teacher. Generally it was a bottle of perfume, a carved paper knife, or a leather-bound notebook. After the gift was handed to the teacher, Alisa would produce her own special surprise, a napkin she had embroidered, or a view, perhaps of the Crimea, painted and framed by herself.

At that period in her school life Alisa was fond of copying picture postcards and her parents made much of it, saying that she would surely grow up to be an artist. But when a new boy turned up in her class who could paint far better than she, and from life, not from picture postcards, her popularity waned and she lost interest in painting. She soon took to dancing, giving a successful performance of a "Moldavanesque" at school. Everybody began to predict a stage career for her. Alisa's mother hastened to take her darling daughter to a famous choreographer who found she was not without talent. But Alisa had little opportunity for solo dancing at school since group performances were more favoured. She next turned her attention to writing verses. No longer in danger of being submerged by the "collective," she wrote poems, signed them, and was flattered when they appeared in the school wall newspaper.

No wonder that at school Alisa was considered to be gifted. "She stands out from among the rest of the children," her school teachers said. That Alisa was a capable little girl was beyond doubt but behind her versatile interests was the desire to show off. She would turn to one thing, then to another, quickly losing interest if it failed to bring her the easy popularity her heart craved.

And now in her more mature years this side of her character revealed itself in her attitude to sports. Fame as a skier had come almost over-

night. She won the U.S.S.R. women's championship and managed to keep the title for quite a long time, partly through the lucky fact that she had no serious opponents to fear, but largely because Chudinov was not only a splendid coach but also a clever strategist, a hard taskmaster during the training period, and knew how to make the most of all of Alisa's assets.

During her first year with Chudinov Alisa was a little in love with him and obediently did everything he demanded, no matter how capricious his demands were at times. Later, when she realized, as she declared to her girl friends, that he was "hopeless" as far as her designs upon him were concerned and that there was no breaking through his reserve, she lost interest in training. More than ever she trusted to chance. This caused a rift between them.

"She's a bit of an adventuress," Chudinov often complained to me.

Alisa as a ski-runner was marking time. And Chudinov blamed himself for it. He said that he was a poor psychologist and had set too much store on Alisa's natural gifts. He also thought that he had made too much of her and was too lavish in praising her at the Sports Committee. And it was really held against Chudinov that he had failed to make Alisa into a first-class ski champion.

"Hello, Car! I didn't recognize you at first. Are you going? I'd rather you stayed and helped me to thrash matters out."

"He's in a hurry," Chudinov put in. "Besides we've already thrashed matters out. Step in, Alisa."

I would have liked nothing better than to have remained and given Alisa a piece of my mind. No matter what Stepan said, I was certain that her tactless speech at the Sports Committee meeting had cut him to the quick. It was the last straw after all the talk at the ski section and I knew it was responsible for Stepan's sudden decision.

But I was up against Stepan's obstinate nature which I knew only too

well. There was, for instance, that night in Karelia. Many years had passed since then, yet he wouldn't hear a word of it. But I had a more or less clear idea of what had happened.

I came to Karelia as a war correspondent. There I joined Chudinov's ski detachment. One night when I was on my way back from the field post, I got separated from the men. A blizzard began. I was caught in it and lost all sense of direction. Soon I found I had strayed into territory patrolled by enemy Tommy-guns. Utterly exhausted by my long wanderings, I lost my bearings completely. I was almost frozen to death and all but buried in a snow-drift when Chudinov, who had set out to search for me, found me and carried me back to our lines. Apparently on the way back there was some shooting and it was then that Chudinov was wounded in the knee.

On regaining my senses I found that I was lying in our dug-out. But I was still in a daze and things seemed blurred around me. After a while I could distinguish a fire blazing in the little stove but there did not seem to be anybody about the place. Again a drowsiness came over me. In one of my wakeful moments I saw Chudinov slip in and noticed that he was limping. He sat down by my side. His leg was bandaged. He raised it and put it across the bunk. Then he called to one of the men and began to tell the story of how some skier had found me and carried me to the dug-out.

Shortly after this I left Chudinov's detachment for another sector of the front.

Chudinov was taken to hospital just before my departure, much against his will, his vehement protests and stubbornness proving of no avail. His wound was extremely serious and he had made things worse by the strenuous walk to the dug-out with me on his back.

It was not until after the war that I ran into one of the men who had fought in Chudinov's ski detachment. He recognized me but when I

tried to sound him on the subject of my rescue, he looked puzzled and asked, "So, the commander hasn't told you, eh? Well, we were ordered to keep mum. You can guess the truth if you wish. I personally can tell you nothing."

CHAPTER 2

"G O O D-B Y E, S K I I N G!"

A carriage of a suburban electric train was packed with skiers on their way to Podrezkovo, a famous skiing place near Moscow. With all the seats occupied by young men in ski caps and girls in knitted toques holding skis upright, the carriage bore a faint resemblance to the deck of a galley. The train was rolling through the snow-blanketed country round Moscow, disturbing the shadows of pines which intermingled with sunbeams flitting past the carriage windows and slipping up and down the rows of skis.

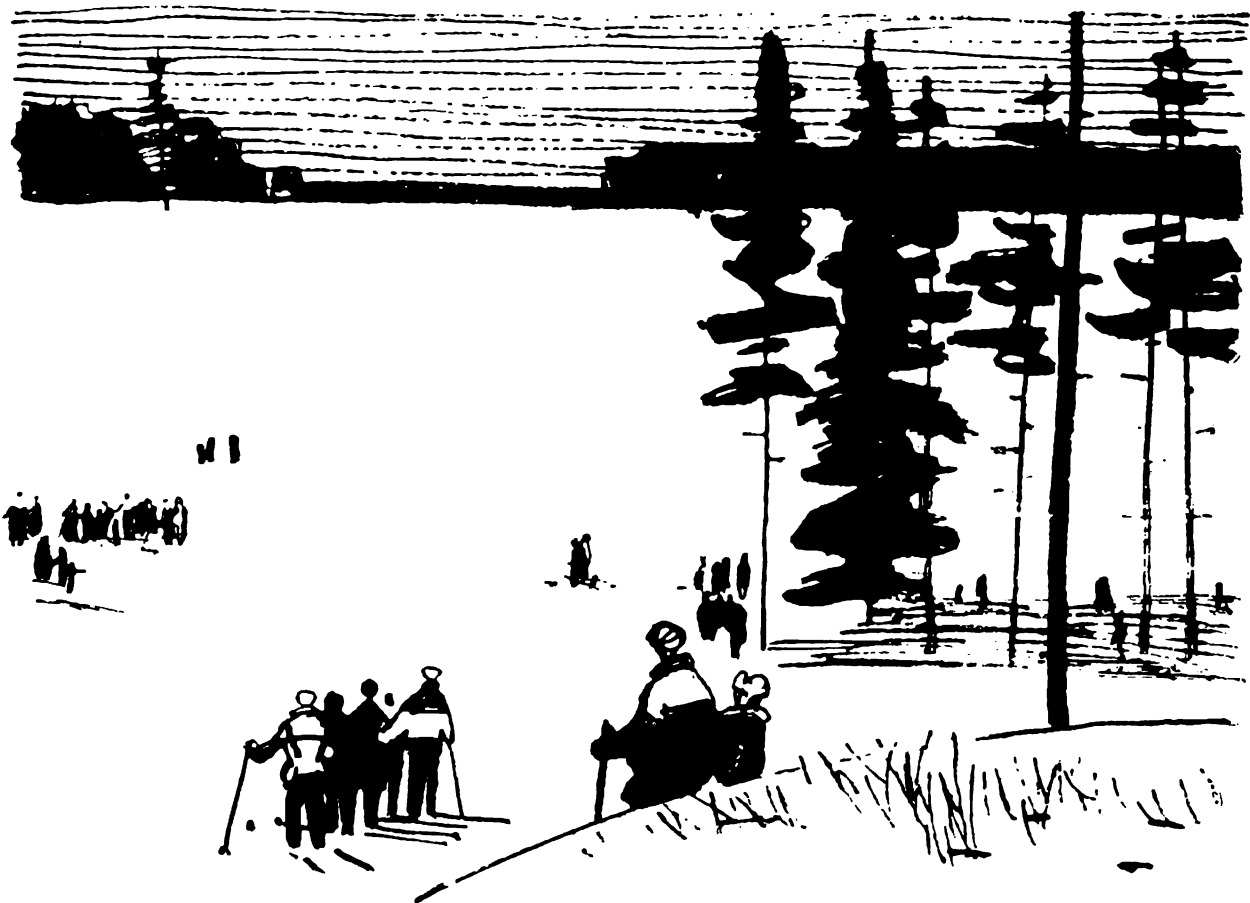
Going to a ski race with groups of excited contestants filling many of the train's carriages had always been a treat to me.

The event we were to witness in Podrezkovo on that day was the women's ten-kilometre race which rounded out the Annual Winter Tournament. The prize was the Crystal Cup, held for the past few years by the Raduga Sports Association. All the efforts of Mayak, Raduga's No. 1 rival, to recover this important trophy were in vain. Stepan Chudinov was a member of the Mayak Sports Association. And though he worked hard coaching Mayak skiers, they just could not win back the Crystal Cup. Many of Chudinov's skiers walked away with prizes at various tournaments, but Mayak's total was somehow always short a few points to win it first place.



Even Alisa Baburina, the country's leading woman skier, though invariably victor, was ahead of her opponents only by two or three seconds which was not enough to mend Mayak's affairs and win it the coveted cup.

A gentle wind was blowing. It carried the fragrance of sun-warmed pines, lightly rattled the wires, fluttered the coloured sports flags and nipped the cheeks a little. The world around looked rosy, rejuvenated and radiant with the gleam of green fir in the transparent air and the sparkle of white snow. The sky above the russet pines was a delicate blue. There were dark blue shadows on the snow and little red flags waving



along the carefully traced line of the ski course. It was a world of frost and sun in which everyone breathed freely.

The race was on and the last of the contestants was already off when I climbed to the top of a snow-hill a short distance from the finish. It was here that I caught sight of Chudinov. He was wearing his checkered Swiss blazer and though quite a distance separated us I knew I was not mistaken. To be frank, I had not expected he'd turn up after our conversation. He was on skis, leaning slightly on his sticks. With a somewhat bored expression he gazed at the stop-watch in his hand and then at the runners approaching the finish.

I skied over to his side. He turned quickly with what seemed to me a guilty smile.

"Surprised to see me, eh?" he said. "I suppose you think I just couldn't keep away?"

I only shrugged.

"I didn't mean to be rude," said Chudinov. "Don't be too hasty in drawing your conclusions." He squared his chin and striking one ski against the other shook the snow off. "I am here because I promised Alisa to come. I didn't want her to say I'd backed out at the crucial moment. I even went over the schedule of the entire race with her. But what of it? It doesn't mean a thing. She'll try to make the most of what's in her. But that's not much."

A man in a ski suit of the latest cut, with shining buttons, pockets and zippers in the most unexpected places, was hastily climbing up the hill, hugging a ski under each arm. He was breathing hard and kept sinking deep into the snow. This was Tyulkin, Mayak's business manager. As he removed his leather ski cap with a button in the middle, he revealed a head of thinning light hair and rosy skin at the temples. There was something distinctly canine about him just then.

"Hello, Comrade Chudinov."

"Hello, Tyulkin," Chudinov replied without looking at him.

"Headline greetings to the toiler of the pen, our very special correspondent," he turned to me. "Well, is Alisa coming in first?"

"She is," Chudinov replied coldly.

"And her time?"

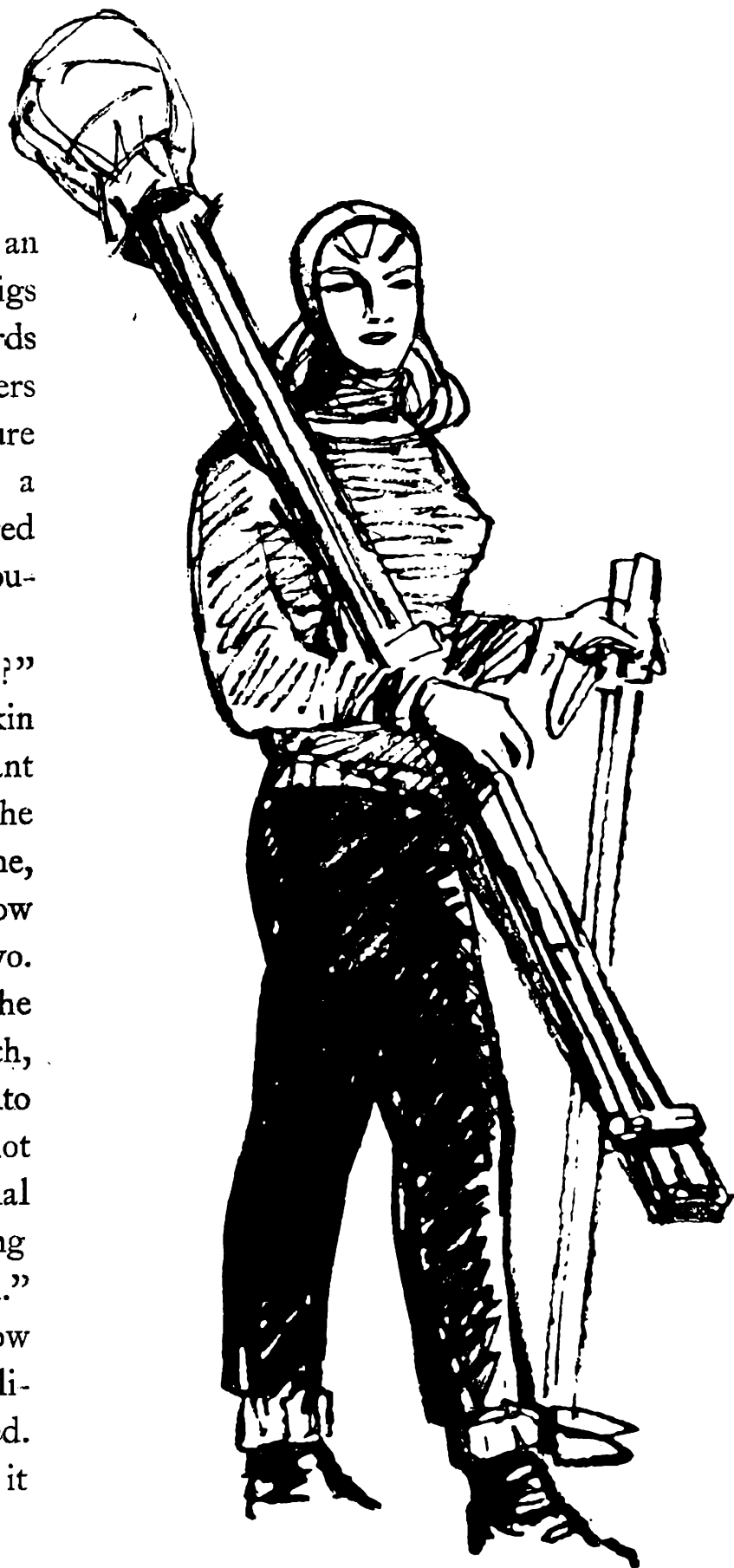
"Same as last year," Chudinov said and turned away with a deprecating gesture.

"Good enough for us," said Tyulkin. "So long as she is first, we're satisfied. What more do you want?"

I took up my field glasses and looked in the direction of the finish where there was an arc ornamented with twigs and flags. Gliding towards it, far ahead of the others was a skier with the figure 11 distinctly visible in a white square on her red sweater. It was Alisa Baburina coming in first.

"You ask what I want?" Chudinov said to Tyulkin behind my back. "I want Mayak to win back the Crystal Cup, that's one, and I want Alisa to show better time, that's two. With such results," he pointed at his stop-watch, poking it practically into Tyulkin's nose, "we'll not get far at the international meets, and Raduga is going to carry off the prize again."

"Honest, I don't know what you want from Alisa," Tyulkin mumbled. "What difference does it



make what time she shows if she comes in first? I'm taking a practical view of the matter. She gets the medal and the medal means fame."

Chudinov made an impatient gesture.

"What's the use of talking to a chump like you. Her coming in first now means nothing to me because for the past three years she's been showing exactly the same time on the same run. But I suppose I'm the one that's no good."

Tyulkin had one of his eyes fixed on the stop-watch Chudinov was holding before him.

"Maybe that stop-watch of yours is wrong," he said. "You need one that's exact to a fraction of a second. I'll tell you what, I'll get you a new watch, the latest American model, if you wish."

"Go to the devil!"

Tyulkin sighed, his better feelings hurt, and began going sideways down the hill, now and then sinking into the snow. His skis and sticks were still under his arms.

"Say you, sports expert, can't you use your skis?" Chudinov shouted after him.

"Haven't the time, my friend," came from below, "I ski on flat ground and on parade days only. But I'm not going to risk my neck skiing downhill."

Just then a figure gliding across the sun-bathed snow came into view. Through my field glasses I saw that it was Number 15. She was rapidly approaching the tape with long, resilient strides.

Chudinov was no longer watching the ski run. He turned about on his skis and was ready to slide down the slope.

"Well, I've kept my word," he said, "and that's the last time you're seeing me on a ski track."

"You can do as you please. Only if you ask me, you're behaving foolishly. Take a look at that girl, a last look!"

Reluctantly, Chudinov followed my gaze. The girl that had attracted my notice was going at a brisk pace. At first we had a side view of her. But as she turned, we saw her face. Moving swiftly and gracefully against the background of scintillatingly white snow, she presented a beautiful picture. She had large eyes and the obstinate expression of an overgrown youngster. The Mayak emblem gleamed on her sleeve. A few loose strands of hair had escaped from under her toque, her skin was glowing delicately and she seemed to be soaring over the white blanket. After a quick christi she topped a steep rise, thrusting energetically with her sticks, and was now sweeping down a hill in a welter of pearly snow. And as I watched her she seemed to me the living embodiment of Russia's rosy, invigorating winter.

After a while I recognized her. I had seen her the year before at a meet in the Urals. In her part of the country she was very popular and was nicknamed Queen of the Snows. And now here she was in Moscow, pitting her strength against the best skiers of the land. The girl gave me an idea—a flash of hope.

"Did you see her?" I asked Chudinov, holding out my field glasses to him. "Your Alisa is not the hub of the universe. Just look at the way that girl skis!"

He waved aside the glasses but couldn't take his eyes off the ski run.

"Not bad, her pacing's good. See her top that height, eh? After covering more than half the distance she looks as fresh as though she'd just started. But what's that to me?" he said in a different tone, his enthusiasm gone.

Violently thrusting with his sticks, he went hurtling down the hill. I followed him. We skied down to a group of spectators standing close to the run. Near by, one of the judges stood holding his stop-watch. Seeing Chudinov, he hurried to his side.

"Did you see that girl? Some racer! The way she topped that hill!"

"She may have the makings of a good runner," put in one of the spectators, "but she lacks technique. Lost too much time on that flat run. She's nowhere near Baburina."

The girl was now going up a sheer slope at a very swift pace.

"Look at her now, Stepan." My enthusiasm waxed high. "As cool as on a pleasure run. And that's the third lap of the run. What she needs is a good coach. I'm not trying to talk you into anything, still if I were you and wanted to have a clear conscience I would. . . ."

Chudinov interrupted me.

"My dear fellow, drop that line, it's too crude." Slowly he screwed up his eyes and again turned to look at the girl. "Yes, she's good, there's no denying it," he conceded testily. "She's made of the right stuff, but no technique." Then he asked casually and with a yawn, "Where is she from anyhow?" He stretched out his hand for my glasses.

By the time I had removed the strap and field glasses from round my neck, handed them to Stepan and he had adjusted them, the skier was far ahead and now had another descent in front of her. Keeping her pace and apparently trying to cut across the somewhat curved line of the course she turned a corner round a thicket. Sidestepping slightly to keep her balance, she knocked against the thicket and I saw snow falling from the disturbed branches.

"Number 15," Chudinov remarked thoughtfully, lowering the field glasses. "Have you got the list? I want to know who she is."

Number 15, as I had already seen, was "Natasha Skuratova, Mayak, Zemogorsk." Suddenly an idea struck me. What if I were to. . . .

"Her name's Zinaida Avdoshina," I said with perfect assurance. "She's from Vologda."

"From Vologda," Chudinov repeated softly to himself.

"She's certainly lucky you've had an offer from Vologda," I said hurriedly, hoping he would fall into the trap I was setting for him.

"Your choice is clear now," I went on innocently. "You were wavering between Vologda and Zemogorsk. Fate itself points to Vologda."

"Vologda, you say?" Chudinov repeated musingly. "Fate, you say? Well, old man, that's settled. I'm going to Zemogorsk—to get out of temptation's way."

"All right, do as you please," I said, delighted that my scheme had worked.

Before going down the hill I took a last look at the ski course and realized that something was amiss there. The judge had raised his megaphone and was calling Number 15, apparently telling her to get back to the track. The spectators shouted too. The girl, going full speed, came to an abrupt halt, raising a swirl of snow. Without realizing it, she had strayed from the track and now quickly turned back to climb the steep hill she had just left behind.

At the finish, excited fans, skiers and cameramen were trying to elbow their way to the front. I heard the announcer's voice coming from a loudspeaker perched on a pole.

"Number 11, Alisa Baburina, Merited Master of Sport, Mayak, is approaching the line. This will be her third victory in three years. Baburina's time, however, runs short of winning first place for Mayak. The Crystal Cup remains with Raduga."

The crowd round the finish was not large enough to obstruct it from view and I saw Alisa cross the line beneath the decorated arc and almost drop from exhaustion, her loose hair in front pasted to her moist forehead. But before she could fall, she was caught by some skiers. Today her grit and her recklessness had again seen her through.

Looking important, Tyulkin pushed his way through the crowd.

"How was the wax?" he asked Alisa.

"Splendid! Thanks, Tyulkin. Where is Chudinov?" Baburina appeared to be disappointed.

"Forget him. You'll never see him again. He said so himself," Tyulkin made no bones about it. "Here's our special correspondent, ask him. I'm off. Headline greetings!"

"What's he talking about?" Alisa asked.

"His usual drivel. But Chudinov's leaving for Zemogorsk. That's final."

"Did he observe me today?"

"He did and his eye was on the stop-watch all the time."

"Have I disappointed him again?"

She said this in a guilty tone which made me feel a little sorry for her.

"You're not altogether to blame for what's happened, Alisa. He seems to have got it into his head that he's no good as a coach any more. But then of course you did make things worse by speaking at the Sports Committee the way you did, complaining of his brusqueness. You know well enough why you're not progressing."

"Time is an obsession with him," Alisa snapped angrily. "His training is killing. And what does he want? After all I came in first, didn't I? He sees nothing but that stop-watch of his."

"It showed that you had failed to keep your promise of improving on your time."

"I almost did and that's not bad, considering that the others were far worse. I can't turn into a machine, deny myself everything just to feed his vanity as a coach. I'm sick of it all. You understand me, don't you? I just can't go on that way. He's tormenting me with his schedule. People say I like to take things easy. That's not true. You saw for yourself how much it cost me to come in first today. When I run a race and approach the finishing line, there's nothing more important than to break the tape. But there are other things in life besides skiing. I may allow myself a little distraction, mayn't I?"

"Chudinov thinks you've got to build up a reserve and give much more time than you've been giving to skiing. You win all right, but it's only your technique and vanity that see you through. In sports you've got to build up health and strength—that's where Chudinov's schedule comes in. And you don't care if you squander these precious things. You don't train properly and trust too much to luck."

"All right, I've heard enough," Alisa cut me short. She was her old vain self again. She raised high her pointed chin, her shoulders twitching beneath the elegant fur wrap flung over them. "You'll forgive me but I've heard all that first hand already and I'll probably hear it dozens of times again."

"No, Alisa, that's just it, you're not likely to hear it again."

Near the dressing-room I overtook two girls, trudging slowly, their skis tied together and flung over their shoulders. They wore identical ski suits with the Mayak emblem gleaming on their sleeves, and looked dejected. One was Number 7 and the other, the taller of the two, Number 15. The latter was, of course, Natasha Skuratova, and her friend was listed as Maria Bogdanova, also from Zemogorsk.

They did not seem to care if they followed the path or not, wading through the deep snow most of the time. Their voices rang hollow and sad. I slowed down my pace. Maria Bogdanova, a short girl, spoke with a staccato Ural accent.

"We've disgraced ourselves, didn't we?" she said on the verge of tears.

Her companion shrugged angrily and readjusted her skis.

"Pull yourself together, Masha, Moscow, as the saying goes, puts no faith in tears!"

"You can afford to talk that way because you came in the second

ten. Moreover, you've got an excuse—you went off the route," said Masha. "But what about me?" she asked hopelessly.

"How did you make out?"

"Twenty-ninth."

"All right, there was a thirtieth, wasn't there?"

"Very comforting. I wonder what you'd have said to the thirtieth?"

"I'd have said, 'You have a good round figure there!'"

They laughed mirthlessly.

"We've bungled things, Natasha," the short girl was beside herself with grief. "We'll be ashamed to show our faces in Zemogorsk. We're sure to be the laughing stock of the town."

"If anyone thinks it funny, let him laugh," Natasha said tossing back a loose strand of hair. "One thing is clear. Nothing will ever make me run another race. I'm through for good!"

"You don't mean it, Natasha? What about our own annual tournaments? Remember, you're the town's champion. Surely you're not going to let our team down?"

"You heard me. I said I was through." Natasha swung her skis from one shoulder to the other. "No more ski runs for me. And once I've made up my mind—it stays made up as you know."

A minute later the girls disappeared into the dressing-room.

CHAPTER 3

THE ZEMOGORSKANS—OLD AND YOUNG

Zemogorsk was growing with amazing speed. Before the war you would have looked in vain for it on the map. It was a small mining settlement hidden away in the woods when it was discovered that its deposits of ore were very valuable. At the beginning of the war many

large plants from the south of the country were moved here and Zemogorsk ore came in very handy. But it had to be concentrated. Thus it was that a large concentration mill sprang up near the mines. The speed with which it was built staggered the local population, not quite accustomed to such tempos. It was at this mill that the ore was sorted, processed and divested of all waste. And it was around the concentration mill that the new town began to grow quickly, spreading over the hillsides and encroaching on the forestlands.

I had been to Zemogorsk a number of times. On my first trip, there was but the bare suggestion of what the place might develop into in the future. At that time the streets were all huddled in a rather dense pine grove which extended to the margin of the mines. Often these were streets in name only. In reality they were forest paths, just as the squares were really clearings. There was a certain bareness about the beginnings of life in this rising town. Everywhere were the carcasses of buildings with no masonry or timber frames and no walls. Water pipes ran exposed along the ditches and the inhabitants fetched water from street hydrants. Smoke curled out of stoves laid out in the streets. Clothes were hung out to dry on lines in front of wooden shacks and mud-huts. There were no shops, and wares were sold in tents or in open stands. The lights above the new town were unshaded and burned with a cold uninviting glare. The new houses stood wide apart, hemmed in by the thick foliage of the woods which refused to retreat in the face of advancing civilization.

A year later, when I again visited Zemogorsk, urban life had taken deeper root there. Walls were going up, buildings were being roofed, and the look of bareness was vanishing. Outdoor trade had given place to regular trade in shops. The exposed water pipes had disappeared underground and into the homes. The bare earth was sheathed in wooden and flag pavements. Street-lamps were shaded. There were

courtyards between houses and what had been a big open space was now quite a thoroughfare.

But the rigours of North Ural nature were not to be subdued so easily. In winter the snow swept down the mountain sides like the quicksands of the dunes. It rose in heaps round the town's outskirts and drifted into the streets, right to the heart of the town where, in Lenin Square, burned the proud lights of Ruda, the new cinema, and where the Novy Ural Hotel was rising. At times the blizzards were so severe the entire city would be buried in snow. Pathways had to be cleared to municipal buildings and people had to work strenuously with shovel and spade to beat off the onslaught of snow.

The heavy snows made Zemogorskans go about on ski a good part of the winter. Even when Zemogorsk was still a small settlement, its skiers were famous throughout the outlying region. Later the new town earned the reputation of having the best ski-runners in that part of the country. At annual winter sports meets in the Uktus Mountains near Sverdlovsk, the tall, strongly-built Zemogorsk skiers began to carry away prizes. But they were still a long way off from winning the U.S.S.R. ski championship. Though possessing great stamina and other qualities, Zemogorsk skiers evidently lacked something which could help them to win that title. All the same in the Urals Zemogorsk was much thought of as a city of winter sports.

One of Zemogorsk's most popular sports clubs was Mayak, founded back in the early mining days. At least two-thirds of the local prizes were displayed in the club's glass-cases beneath a banner on which against a blue background was a red tower emitting rays. The hilly country round Zemogorsk was eminently suitable for cross-country races and slalom, the skiers sweeping with lightning speed in between rows of little marking flags along the course. Hockey matches and skaters' meets were held on a frozen mountain lake near by.

It was the long-cherished dream of the ski-minded inhabitants of Zemogorsk to win the U.S.S.R. ski championship and show their superiority over their rivals in Moscow, Leningrad, Vologda, Gorky and other towns. They hoped that the achievements of the miners and the workers of the concentration mill, the exploits of Zemogorsk sportsmen and the general good show the town was putting up would win it fame and that it would be chosen as the venue of the Annual Winter Sports Tournament with the Crystal Cup as the prize.

Meanwhile, the people of Zemogorsk were impatiently waiting to hear the results of the Moscow tournament. Ski fans were particularly looking forward to welcoming home Natasha Skuratova, a great favourite and the town's champion. Natasha, tall, well-built, athletic but very feminine and rather shy, taught junior classes in a boarding-school. She changed completely when racing. Unexcelled in these parts, she had been aptly christened "Queen of the Snows."

Much as they admired her, Zemogorsk sports lovers knew that Moscow was the home of many splendid skiers, Alisa Baburina for one. Her name often appeared in the sports columns of Moscow's newspapers. She was a competitor much to be feared. Yet they felt that Natasha could stand up to Alisa Baburina and uphold the reputation of their town.

(Here Carichev's story broke off as an account in the first person, and he alternated between relating what he himself had seen and reconstructing events from hearsay. When I told him this was an error of style, he declared that it did not matter. Everything in the story, he insisted, was based on facts, he had invented nothing himself. He argued that though he himself had not been able to witness all the events he described, he learned of them first-hand and in the greatest detail from those who had. I decided that Carichev knew best and did not alter his manuscript.—*Lev Kassil.*)

On the day Zemogorsk skiers were expected to return from Moscow, Nikita Skuratov, Natasha's father, was in a particular hurry to get home early.

Natasha's father was one of the town's early prospectors and, in those days, a great hunter. Later he was the leader of a miners' team. His present job was that of an instructor at the local miners' vocational school. Stamping the snow off his boots, he stepped into the doorway of a log house solidly built in the Ural style. The house had been a gift from the city in recognition of his many services.

His wife, a trim and tiny woman, was setting the table covered with a snow-white cloth in a room which looked as spick-and-span as herself. On the walls hung the honour certificates of her husband and her son Savely, a foreman at the mine, as well as Natasha's sports diplomas.

"Hello, Mother!" Skuratov greeted his wife in a loud, raucous voice that might have belonged to a huge man but was strangely out of keeping with his small though thick-set figure. He hung up his sheepskin in the hall and strode into the room. Savely was already seated at table. Recently returned from the army, he wore a tunic from which the shoulder-strap loops had not yet been ripped off.

The little bowl with jam, the freshly-baked pies, the plate of pickled apples, all arranged effectively in the centre of the table, pronounced it to be a special occasion. The family was expecting Natasha. But there was no sign of the girl.

"What's keeping Natasha?" Skuratov asked. "The Moscow plane arrived quite a while ago. I saw our sportsmen in the streets. The band was playing."

Savely put aside the newspaper he was reading.

"They don't deserve to be met with music, Father," said Savely. "I hear our skiers made a poor showing in Moscow."

"I don't believe it. Moscow is a grand city but when it comes to skiing—well, skiing is not in their blood like it is in ours."

"Don't get worked up, Father," his wife put in. "Natasha should be here any minute now. She'll tell you how they made out in Moscow. My, I hope, she hasn't forgotten the taste of her mother's pies."

Savely took up his paper again and smiled wryly.

"She may have, after all the banqueting in Moscow's finest hotels with special 'maître d'hôtel' sauces—I remember that's what we were served when we had our convention in Moscow. I'm afraid, Mother, your pies won't mean so very much to her now."

There was someone on the porch stamping the snow off the feet. . . . A knock. Natasha's mother went quickly to open the door, saying, "Natasha, at last! I'm so glad."

But instead of Natasha there was a young man in a black fur cap and greatcoat, a relic from his apprentice school days, now too tight for him.

"Good evening, Comrade Skuratov," he said. "Glad to see you, Antonina Kapitonovna. Hello, Savely!"

"Make yourself at home," said Antonina Kapitonovna, motioning him to sit down.

"Well, what brings you here?" the elder Skuratov asked.

"I've come to see Natasha. I'm with *Zemogorsk Worker*."

"Wait a minute, young man. How come you're from a newspaper when I remember you from the vocational school? Didn't you promise me you'd go to the pit?"

The newcomer, Donat Remizkin, was embarrassed. He began to crumple his cap and a deep blush suffused his neck and face. His hair was short-cropped in sportish style and a funny fringe bristled over his brow.

"I am working in the pit all right," he said. "But I've joined the literary circle and am now doing part-time work as reporter for *Zemogorsk Worker*. I can show you my reporter's card."

He rose and after fumbling a little in his pocket drew out a small hard-cover folder. Presently with still greater embarrassment he took a folded newspaper from an inner pocket.

"And here's something of mine published in the paper," he said, resuming his seat.

Natasha's father, after smoothing the paper with his stiff, work-hardened fingers, and taking a look at the item signed by his young friend, asked, "And what is it you're going to write about Natasha?"

Remizkin was about to jump to his feet again, but then thought better of it and remained sitting.

"I want to interview her on her impressions of Moscow and the ski tournament, as well as on the forthcoming races in Zemogorsk."

"Natasha hasn't arrived yet," put in her mother.

Remizkin looked suspiciously at her.

"But she has," he said. "I saw her myself at the airport. She made off very quickly and slipped into a bus before anyone had a chance to speak to her."

Natasha Skuratova's arrival was awaited with even greater impatience in another part of the town, near a dense pine grove. Here two milk-white electric orbs illumined the front of a solidly built wooden two-storey house with the sign "*Zemogorsk Boarding-School*" on the door.

On her way to the boarding-school Natasha was thinking how difficult it would be to break the news of her defeat to her pupils. She knew that they were waiting eagerly for her, anticipating the happy

moment when she would show them the gold medal they were sure she had won and they would pass it from hand to hand, examining it carefully with bated breath. And then, they hoped, they would feast their eyes on a picture of the Crystal Cup. How was she going to tell them, especially little Seryozha Orlov, who had such boundless faith in her as a runner, that she had not lived up to their expectations, that she had been a dismal failure in Moscow, and was returning with nothing her mind irrevocably made up never to enter a ski competition again.

Mustering up courage, Natasha ascended the snow-swept steps of the porch. She put down her suitcase, looked around, sighed and after a moment's thought pulled vigorously at the bell cord.

Instantly from behind the door came the low, slightly husky voice she knew so well.

"Who's there?" it said.

"Open the door, Seryozha, it's your teacher," she whispered, her lips pressed close to the door.

The door was thrown open and, before she knew it, Natasha had the arms of a chubby-cheeked, round-headed youngster with close-cropped hair round her neck. He was a heavy boy and Natasha was weighed down by his embrace. Rolling after him came a whole gang of little boys and girls dressed in navy blue sailor suits. As they tumbled out into the frost, clouds of steam formed around them.

So, they've put on their best suits in my honour, Natasha was quick to notice.

Hugging each one in turn and pushing them back into the house, where the warm air rose in a vapourous mist, Natasha said sternly, "You'll catch cold. Get back into the house quickly. Seryozha, I mean you, too!"

She was now in the midst of bouncing, skipping and yelling youngsters, all trying to nestle close to her, to hug her and kiss her, and she felt their little noses poking her cheeks and chin.

"Teacher is back, teacher is back!" they shouted.

Little Seryozha, clutching Natasha's sleeve tightly, squeezed in edgewise through the door to be at her side, all the while peering up into her face.

"Do tell us, teacher, have you brought the Crystal Cup?" he kept asking her. "Is it in your valise? And the gold medal? Show it to us."

Along with other boys he got hold of Natasha's suitcase, stumbling, getting under her feet and in everyone's way.

"Teacher, I practised the turn you'd taught me. Watch me do it!"

Releasing his hold of Natasha's sleeve but still gripping her suitcase, he tried to show how he did it, but slipped and went flop on the floor to everyone's delight. He was up again in a second, rather put out. But he soon smoothed his clothes and poked a youngster who was laughing at him with his elbow.

"What are you laughing at?" he muttered huskily. "You can't always expect it to come out, can you?"

"The last time you tried that turn you fell too, with your nose in the snow," a little girl said.

"Next time I'm sure I'll manage it."

"Please, teacher, did you win the ski race in Moscow?" asked the little girl who had just been teasing Seryozha.

All at once everyone fell silent.

Natasha read implicit faith in herself in the eyes of the children—and joy. They expected to hear good news.

In a low level voice she answered:

"No, Katya, the race was won by Alisa Baburina, U.S.S.R. champion."

The children were politely silent but disappointment was written on their faces. They stood peering into their teacher's eyes.

"And she beat you too?" Katya, still unbelieving, wanted a direct answer.

"Yes."

"By ever so little?" Katya asked hopefully.

"No, by quite a lot."

The children again fell silent. Seryozha and the three other boys who had been holding Natasha's suitcase put it down gingerly and noiselessly on the floor.

"Well, it doesn't come out every time," with a sudden toss of the head said Seryozha. "Next time I bet you'll beat them all, teacher, won't you?"

"No, children," Natasha was speaking in slow and deliberate tones as though eager to bring home her words to herself as well as to her hearers. "No more ski tournaments for me. I'll go skiing with you here, but you won't see me racing any more."

Just then down the stairs came Taisya Valeryanovna, the school superintendent, a rather heavy woman who always held herself erect.

"I heard the front door bang and the noise that followed, then there was silence, and I began to wonder what was happening



here," she said. "Now I see, Natasha, that you're the cause of it. I'm so glad you're back, we've missed you terribly. Haven't we, children? Why don't you say something? Aren't you glad she's back? Why, all I've been hearing is—when will our teacher come back? And now that she's here I can't say you look particularly happy about it."

She went up to Natasha and kissed her on the cheek.

"Well, what success in Moscow?" she asked.

Natasha did not reply.

"What's come over you?" the older woman looked searchingly, first at Natasha, then at the children.

Nobody said a word.

CHAPTER 4

ENGINEER CHUDINOV ARRIVES

Thus it was that Natasha Skuratova, her town's ski idol, and Stepan Chudinov, ex-champion of the U.S.S.R. and expert ski coach, had simultaneously made their exit from the ski world.

Further arguing with Stepan was no use. The thing to do was to confirm him still more in the conviction that Zemogorsk, and not Vologda, was the place for him. He had said that he wanted to go to an out-of-the-way spot; and Zemogorsk was hidden away in the taiga where, I tried to reassure him, the only people on skis were hunters. Skiing as a sport was practically unknown there.

I realized that I was deceiving Stepan; the more so since he had great faith in my knowledge of the country, for as a newspaper correspondent I had travelled extensively. Yet I had no scruples of conscience. I felt I was acting for the good of sports, as well as for the good of my friend whose decision to drop out of the ski world I regarded

as a crazy whim. Besides, I thought there still was hope for him to make a comeback. I gathered that from the flicker of admiration which lighted up Stepan's stiffened features when he watched Natasha Skuratova at Podrezkovo.

Well, these two were now bound to meet in Zemogorsk. And quite soon. Whatever the outcome of that meeting, I was willing to take the blame for it.

Stepan placed in my keeping his collection of cigarette lighters and other fire gadgets. He was leaving for Zemogorsk. I saw him off, promising at the earliest opportunity to visit that town and take a look at how construction was getting on there. I wished him success in his new or rather old field to which, as builder and designer, he was now going to give undivided attention.

Stepan appeared deeply touched by all I said.

"I always knew you were a real friend," he said in parting.

I'm afraid, however, that doubts as to the accuracy of the information I had given him began to creep into his mind as soon as he set foot in Zemogorsk.

On learning that the Novy Ural Hotel was not far from the station, Chudinov decided to walk there. He was in the best of spirits. His knee joint had been behaving well, his suitcase seemed surprisingly light, and he had the grand feeling of one who was beginning a new life. He whistled to himself as he walked with a springing stride along the plank pavements of Zemogorsk from which the snow had been cleared. The day was fine and the little snow-blanketed town basked in the rays of the sun. Behind the sturdily-built houses rose towering spruces and beyond them sheer mountain slopes. The little town was hemmed in on all sides by woods and mountains. A serrated



forest wall stretched to the slope of a tall mountain with deep clefts and gulleys overhung by snow ledges. In between the tall spruces and pines surrounding the town peeped factory stacks. Factory whistles were proclaiming the end of a shift. There was the distant buzz of one, the loud trumpeting of another, the shrill notes of a third, all coming from somewhere in the woods.

Chudinov found it amusing to read the names of the town's new streets on neat little plates. Everything in Zemogorsk had the proud air of a new city. And the plates with the street names were a reminder of the recent past when Zemogorsk was a little mining settlement in



the wild woods. Many of the streets were not given new names but inherited those of the old forest divisions such as Big Cutting, Timber Clearing, Siberian Highway, Clay Hill. Chudinov who liked puzzling things out found that the names of the streets and their lay-out could tell him much of the town's history and the direction in which it was spreading.

Zemogorsk must have begun its growth at the foot of a rocky mountain, he concluded, for it was here that the street names had remained unchanged. Some of these recalled the old pre-revolutionary days, the places where fettered political prisoners stopped on their march to Si-

beria, the taverns where people spent their last bit of money on drink, the charred ruins of miners' homes after forest fires. Then there were street names such as Barracks Street, Hospital Street, and others. These came into existence when the little mining settlement was wedging its way into the woods and mountains. But when culture became entrenched in the little town, such street names as School Street, Library Street and, of course, Lenin Square, appeared. What had been a forest clearing was now Yemelyan Pugachov Street and Giordano Bruno Drive. Such street names were particularly popular in the early post-revolutionary years. Streets that came into being when the town began to develop really rapidly were Brick Kiln Street, Evacuation Street—apparently it was here the workers of mills evacuated from the western part of the country settled down during the war—Kievlyanskaya, Moscovskaya streets, all leading to the imposing Victory Square from which stretched the town's main avenue.

Coming towards him Stepan saw a group of vocational school pupils dressed in dark-coloured greatcoats. They were skiing in double file, accompanied by an elderly man in felt boots and a fur coat. Their instructor, Stepan thought. An important-looking official glided past Chudinov—on skis too, his brief-case strapped to his chest so that his hands were free to work the sticks. Next came a pink-cheeked woman lightly crossing Chudinov's path. She too was on skis. Chudinov decided that she had been out shopping, for there was the head of a goose popping out of the knapsack on her back.

Stepan was greatly puzzled by the large number of people he met on skis in the town he had chosen for his new home and for a retreat from the ski world. A gust of wind let loose a small flurry of snow from the slanting roof of one of the houses. A few icicles broke off and hit the poster stuck on a large board. Stepan's face darkened and his worst suspicions were aroused as he read: "Annual Zemogorsk—

Mines—Airport ski race to be held soon with three teams—Mayak, Raduga and Ruda—participating.”

Stepan told me afterwards that he knew I had been lying about Zemogorsk the moment he saw this announcement. He put down his suitcase and took another look at the poster. Then he pulled his fur cap right down to his eyebrows, an action which boded no good.

“Whatever made me come here of all places!” he said swearing under his breath. “They certainly seem to have heard about sports here. Vologda would have been the place for me.”

He picked up his suitcase and continued on his way, resolved to put a bold front on things; after all he needn't mention to anyone that he had ever had anything to do with skiing. And he was not likely to be asked. There was no reason why they should remember him here. It was many years since he had been famous as a ski-runner in his own country and in Europe. A coach? Who ever remembers the names of coaches.

He approached a large two-storey structure, part of it still in scaffolding. Across the front of the building hung a streamer with the words “Novy Ural.” Chudinov as he passed through the hotel's revolving door, a novelty in these parts and the pride of the builders, found himself in a spacious lobby. The hotel had the air of an inhabited place, though it was still under construction. There was a strong smell of timber, fir and fresh paint. Mingling with this were the cooking odours coming from the hotel's kitchen. The staircase leading to the first floor was carpeted. At the receptionist's desk stood a stuffed bear on his hind legs. Near by was a potted palm, its leaves spreading above the bear's head. A woman of startling height and girth glided down from the far end of the lobby to meet Stepan. She was at least half a head taller than he.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

Chudinov explained that he had arrived from Moscow to work in Zemogorsk and that he would stay in the hotel for some time until a suitable flat was found for him. He presented his card saying that he was a building engineer and the words now sounded good to his own ear. He was eager to get over all the formalities connected with his arrival and begin the work to which he planned to give all of his time.

"I'll attend to you in a minute," said the woman. "First I must clear up this mess. There's a weight-lifting contest in town. And the boys have left their gear lying about."

That same instant, with amazing ease, she began lifting some formidable-looking weights which were scattered on the floor and which had escaped Chudinov's notice when he came in from the bright sunshine outside into the dusk of the lobby. Fascinated, he watched the woman toss about the weights and roll them into corners as though they were mere toys.

"Order at last!" she uttered, slightly short of breath. "Welcome to our hotel. My name's Olimpiada Gavrilovna, but most everybody here calls me Aunt Lipa. Now that I've introduced myself, shake hands." She stretched out a big powerful hand which Chudinov pressed with some apprehension.

"Put down your suitcase and wait at the desk," she continued. "I'll see about your room. It'll be a room you may have to share with someone else later on because we're rather full up and are functioning less as a hotel than a boarding-house. Sit down, won't you? There are some newspapers you can read or you might want to step into the barber's. Our barber is one in a million. He is a southerner from Mariupol, moved here in 1941, and has made Zemogorsk his home. He's what you call a man of culture. You'll find it a pleasure to talk to him. Our clients respect him immensely. Drizhik is his name."

Before Chudinov had a chance to reply she flung his suitcase across

her shoulder and drifted up the stairs, causing such a stir of air that the papers on the desk nearly went flying.

A few minutes later, Chudinov was seated in the barber's chair before a large mirror. Opposite it was a wide window and what went on in the street outside behind the interlacings of the scaffolding was reflected in the mirror. Chudinov saw snow-drifts, firs lining the street and infrequent passers-by.

Drizhik was a slight man with a small moustache. A somewhat old-fashioned pince-nez was balanced on the tip of his nose, hardly serving its purpose, and he had about him the sad, detached look of a man burdened with great thoughts. With a languid air of superiority he busied himself with Chudinov's chin. Though outwardly courteous and obliging, he seemed to possess just the slightest tinge of contempt, the "I-had-seen-very-superior-clients-in-my-day" air. Now and then, putting aside the razor, he would bend down to glance into the mirror, touching with the tip of his finger a pimple on his chin. All the while, with much dignity, he carried on a casual conversation with Chudinov's reflection in the mirror.

"Not too hot, is it?" he asked, lathering Chudinov's chin. "Going to stay here long?" He looked into the mirror over his client's head. "So you are. Glad to hear it. I'm sure you'll like the town. When I came here back in 1941, it was just a small mining settlement. And now we've a big city and we're proud of the ore that's mined here!" He took a few specimens from a shelf littered with little jars and bottles. "I'm sure you've an idea how important this ore was in wartime. And now it is too, that of course is something of a secret," he lowered his voice to a whisper. "Another thing we're proud of is our skiers. Surely you ski?"

No sooner was this question asked than Chudinov gave his head such a violent shake that some of the lather dropped from his face on

to the barber's smock. The barber shot a perplexed look at Chudinov's reflection in the mirror, than turning his head peered into his client's face, as though doubting the truth of his answer.

"You don't care for skiing? Strange. But you will care if you settle in this town. Everybody goes in for skiing here." He put aside the shaving-brush and began sharpening the razor.

"Sports is a wonderful thing, but beauty too is important," he went on meditatively. "I have my own ideas on that score. Shall I tell you what they are?"

Although Chudinov sat there with his lathered face making no reply, the barber took it for granted that he had no objection to listening to his theories.

"Yes, indeed, what are they?" he began in rhetorical fashion. "Our land must have citizens with powerful bodies as well as powerful minds. Our whole general development is heading that way, with sports and science in the lead. But what about making people beautiful? Beauty, you may say, is Nature's gift. And those upon whom she has not lavished it are just out of luck, you will tell me next, I suppose. Well, that's where you're wrong. Much can be done to make people look beautiful. And that is where we 'soldiers of hygiene and beauty' come in." He paused. "But what's that you've got across your cheek? A scar? Why not remove it. I once did a wonderful patching up job on the face of a ..." he looked down sympathetically at Chudinov's leg under the table, "of a war veteran." As he talked, he continued passing the razor over Chudinov's face. "I hope it's not painful? Do you mind?" Very gingerly he took hold of the tip of Chudinov's nose. "If I'm not mistaken you're single. All the more reason for taking pride in your looks. I've got some good face cream. Won't charge you anything for it. I take a scientific interest in creams and in waxes for our skiers. I have a special recipe of my own for waxing skis."

Just as the barber was applying more lather to Chudinov's face there came from the street the sound of children singing in high-pitched voices. Chudinov saw reflected in the mirror little boys and girls walking in pairs along the street. All of them were dressed in the same orange-coloured winter coats with camel hair hoods. Gliding on their short skis, they looked like a procession of little gnomes. Surely that's Snowwhite and her little dwarfs coming down the mountain, Chudinov thought, as he caught sight of a tall slender girl on skis accompanying the children. There was something vaguely familiar about the girl's figure.

Drizhik followed his client's gaze, then gave him a quick glance and snatched a toilet water bottle from the table.

"Toilet water?" he asked.

Before Chudinov could reply he was generously sprayed with that smelling stuff by the barber.

Chudinov tried to speak. He opened his mouth, squinted, puffed and then shut his mouth tightly again, for it was full of the nasty toilet water.

"Don't open your eyes for a while yet!" the barber said.

Chudinov heard the clinking of jars on the shelf. The next moment he realized that the barber was gone. The toilet water nipped and stung his skin. When gradually the pain ceased, he opened first one eye and then the other. In the mirror he could see the barber dashing into the street and running up to the young girl with the children. He was trying to thrust a jar into her hand. But the girl did not seem keen on taking it. She stood with her back to the window and Chudinov could not see her face. In the gesture with which the girl waved the barber's hand aside and then set off on her skis there was again something familiar.

But that was all Chudinov saw: the entire window was blotted out by the huge figure of Aunt Lipa who barged into the room.

"I beg your pardon, Olympiada Gav . . . I mean, Aunt Lipa," Chudinov began, "but what's happened to your barber, that knight of beauty and hygiene?"

But Aunt Lipa had no ear for what he was saying. She had caught sight of the barber following the retreating girl.

"Oh, the cruel man! He will be the death of me. He's gone out in the frost with nothing but his smock on. And he catches chills so easily."

With these words she flew out of the barbershop. In an instant she was back, with the spruce little barber wriggling in her arms and trying to touch the floor with his toes.

"My state of health is no business of yours," he hissed. "I'll thank you never to do this to me again, particularly in public."

Aunt Lipa put him gently down on the floor.

"One would think that a man of your standing would act more wisely," she said indignantly. "But you've no consideration, no consideration. If you want to fall ill, go ahead, I don't care."

With a deprecating gesture she swept out of the room, knocking over a chair on her way out and sending it somersaulting to the far end of the room.

"Your wife?" Chudinov asked sympathetically.

"No, just, er—a devoted client. It all started when I removed her freckles. It needed a good deal of cream to do that, you can imagine." He whisked the cloth off Chudinov's shoulders.

"Finished! Would you like some face cream?" he asked again.

"No, thanks."

Chudinov patted his clean-shaven chin and looked into the mirror.

"I suppose I'm quite presentable now," he said. "The Building Department is across the street, isn't it?"

He strolled out of the hotel slightly limping. After the long walk

from the railway station his knee joint was giving him trouble again. The barber's eyes followed him.

"Yes, couldn't be any good on skis. I bet he'll even find walking difficult here in the high snow," the barber muttered to himself. Gingly he took up a jar from the table, brushed it with a napkin and placed it on the shelf—but not before he had admired it from all sides, first squinting with one eye, then with the other, at the label: "A. O. Drizhik's Special Mixture."

CHAPTER 5

"EVERYBODY OUT ON SKI!"

A week or two had gone by since the Zemogorsk skiers had come back from Moscow.

Natasha was returning with her pupils to the boarding-school from a walk. She took them out for walks every day after lessons. The children had been going down snow-hills and racing with each other. But not one of them had again brought up the subject of Natasha's defeat in Moscow. It was as though by tacit agreement they had decided not to refer to it. And Natasha appreciated that. On the whole, whether local ski lovers' vanity had been too deeply wounded by Natasha's poor showing in Moscow and they themselves avoided speaking to her about it, or whether it had been decided to give Natasha time to get over the disappointment, but after two or three attempts had been made at the Mayak Club to get her out to train, no one bothered her any more. Natasha's father put all the blame on the Moscow judges: they had made her stray from the track, picked on trifles, and let that champion girl get ahead of her.

He tried to talk Natasha into resuming training. She had been looked on with such hope as a rising ski star and, he thought, was perhaps praised too much. But Natasha had her father's obstinate nature—the Skuratov strain in her! And he had no success.

But to Savely he said, "She'll come round after a while. Won't be able to stay away long. No use arguing with her now. Even I am powerless to make her change her mind. She's her mother all over. Stubborn!"

Natasha had always been a pet at home and was seldom crossed. Her brothers, Savely and Yeremei—the latter joined the Urals Guards and fell in the war—were both many years her senior. The Skuratovs had resigned themselves to having no more children and when Natasha was born, it was a great and unexpected joy.

But though petted much, Natasha had never been spoilt. The Skuratovs were not a family to indulge any foolish whims. From an early age, Natasha was trained to be self-disciplined. She knew what her privileges and her special duties in the household were. And she never abused the former nor neglected the latter. Natasha's mother often praised her for being a dutiful daughter, and as to her father—she was his darling, the apple of his eye. As soon as she grew up a little, he took her hunting with him though her mother strenuously objected. It was he who taught her how to ski—on ordinary skis as well as on special mountain skis soled with skins and convenient for going up and down hills. Her father often said that her character was like those skis—solid and reliable.

At eight, Natasha could ski faster than most girls of her age and even older. And there were few boys who could equal her. She was a sturdy child, never pampered, inheriting her good health from the Skuratov strain in her. True, she was somewhat wilful and stubborn, but not capricious. At school she was looked up to by both boys and

girls. She gave no quarter to offenders, knowing well how to deal with them after Savely had taught her a few boxing tricks. She had a strong sense of fairness and was always as good as her word. For this, too, the children liked her. She was frequently chosen class monitor or Pioneer Squad leader. When it came to outings on skis or other undertakings which allowed children to escape the keen eyes of their elders, Natasha was their acknowledged captain.

"That girl of yours is a born leader, she'll be famous one day," the neighbours would say. "Oh, we're not after fame, good or ill," her mother would say, waving their praise aside.

Natasha was not vain. She enjoyed being popular, but it did not turn her head. In the winter of 1941, however, she had her first taste of wounded pride. And the cause of it was the behaviour of the children of the employees of a small mill moved during the war from Moscow. Natasha instantly sized up the little Muscovites—they were snobs and show-offs, too sure of themselves. And such chatterboxes! The people to whom she was accustomed from her early years never talked much. And these children—they were like a bunch of magpies in the classroom. And, of course, they thought nothing of opposing the authority of the class monitor and Pioneer Squad leader.

There was one girl among them whom Natasha particularly disliked. Her name was Nonna Stupalskaya. She was the daughter of an engineer, a tall girl, very erect, who sat in front of Natasha. Natasha hated everything about her: her manner of craning her long neck, her fancy plaits, the unpleasant way she had of screwing up her eyes and looking at Natasha from under uplifted arch-shaped brows, her manner of smoothing her dress before going up to the blackboard and her everlasting bragging. The way she spoke one would think that all her Moscow friends were famous film stars or popular football players. And what hurt Natasha most was that all the children enjoyed listen-

ing to her and that gradually this tall, lanky chatterbox was becoming the most popular pupil in the class. It was she who now collected gifts for the wounded in the local hospital, made long speeches at Young Pioneer meetings and hung up in the class the stop-press newspaper reports from the front lines. And she looked down upon Natasha—perhaps Nonna really couldn't help it, for she was half a head taller than she.

Natasha watched her and the other newcomers very closely. It annoyed her to hear them constantly talk about the wonders of Moscow. What a pity they had no eye for the beauties of her own native town. At times they even spoke with contempt of this town which had risen among the hills and wild woods. Their own parents were now assisting in building up Zemogorsk. And the children had no better sense than to complain about the town: it had no underground, no planetarium and only two cinemas. But what they complained most about was the cold winds. What ninnies—to be afraid of a cold wind.

When these stuck-up youngsters from Moscow entered the Annual Zemogorsk Ski Tournament and decided to pit their strength against the local school children, Natasha realized that the time had come to teach them a lesson. She knew that they were no match for the local children who were practically born on skis. And that tall, conceited Nonna had entered too. Well, she'll only have herself to blame.

Nonna Stupalskaya, they said, was one of the best skiers in her class at the Moscow school she had attended. But she was no match for the strong-limbed Natasha, who was accustomed to the icy blasts of the Urals. Natasha had no difficulty in leaving Nonna far behind at the very outset of the race. In vain did the Moscow girl try her hardest. Her efforts looked pitiful compared with the confident strapping pace at which Natasha raced to break the tape to the ringing applause of her townsfolk. Natasha's victory was as complete as the defeat of

the Moscow girl. Perhaps on that day she had her first taste of the intoxicating sweetness of victory and real popularity.

When Natasha, flushed and triumphant, was returning home after the race she ran into Nonna outside the house where the Moscow evacuees lived. Her skis flung aside, Nonna was sitting in the snow and quietly sobbing. Beside her stood Semyon, her six-year-old brother, thin and pale like herself. With one hand he was trying to lift his sister's head and with the other kept offering her a half-eaten crust of black bread thinly covered with jam.

He shot an angry glance at Natasha. Recognizing her, he lowered his eyes and hid the bread-crust behind his back.

"What d'you want?" he asked. "Go away! You beat Nonna out of spite. Go away! She won't eat if you don't. She gave me her portion at breakfast this morning. And I'm sorry I took it, didn't know she'd have to run a race."

He paused and then went on speaking like a grown-up.

"You're better off than we are. Mother says you've got potatoes left over from the summer. And we get no nourishing food 'cause Mother's ill, she can't work. Now you know everything and I bet you're glad you beat Nonna. Go away!"

Natasha stood still for a while not knowing what to say. She wanted to help—she really did. But she could do nothing now but go away. She had a guilty feeling; why, she could not explain.

Next day she went to Nonna's house and waited outside until she saw Semyon come out to play. Reddening and frowning a little, she thrust into his hand the warm little pie her mother had given her to take to school.

It was a mystery to everyone later why Natasha had flatly refused to take part in the ski race against another school in the neighbourhood. On that day, when the lessons were over, she waited for Nonna

at the school entrance, came up to her and suggested they go home together.

That winter she often went skiing with Nonna, but no amount of coaxing could make her take part in another competition.

She recalled all this now as she was taking the children back to the boarding-school. On the way she met a group of skiers returning from training, their skis flung over their shoulders. Among them was Masha Bogdanova, who rushed to Natasha's side.

"What luck my meeting you, Natasha," she said. "I was just going over to your place. My, I'm so excited I've forgotten to say 'hello'." The girls kissed. "We've been looking for you ever since morning."

Natasha squared her shoulders.

"I know what you want and the answer is 'no'!"

"First listen to what I've got to tell you."

"I've heard a hundred times. I said no and that's the end of it."

"All right! Don't train if you don't wish to," said Masha cajolingly, "but why can't you enter the race? Do you want our team to lose the challenge banner?"

Others approached them and Natasha soon found herself in the centre of a group of skiers.

"Be a sport, Natasha!"

"Don't be so obstinate, Natasha!"

The local sports organizer, a pink-faced, extremely snub-nosed fellow, known in Zemogorsk as "Uncle Fedya"—perhaps because he was letting a beard grow—spoke in a shrill voice.

"We don't get on as smoothly as we should with you, Natasha."

He squirmed at the look Natasha gave him and coughed to hide his embarrassment.

"You want things to run smoothly for you, don't you?" she said. "But they don't run smoothly for me. It was you who made too much

fuss about me—had it all planned and running smoothly beforehand, I suppose. But it turned out that I'm nowhere near the Moscow skiers. You with your 'smooth' theories!"

Uncle Fedya interrupted her.

"This sort of talk will do nothing but create bad feeling. I still maintain you've got all the makings of a ski champion, Natasha. It's your technique that lets you down. You need more training."

"You're wasting your breath," said Natasha. "I'm telling you and the boys and girls for the twentieth and I hope the last time that I've quit for good. No more ski races for me!"

"Well, it's your own business," replied Uncle Fedya, "but I think you're making a big mistake," and turning to the others said, "Let's go."

The skiers went off but Masha Bogdanova remained behind with her friend.

"You're stubborn, all right," she said. Then as though remembering something she went on, "I had almost forgotten to tell you; we've a new department head, a building engineer from Moscow. A rather interesting person, quite good-looking, not too old. Perhaps a little odd in some ways. Limp slightly. We asked him to come skiing with us, but he said, 'Too old for that and besides I'm not interested.'"

Meanwhile Chudinov, immaculate in a white smock, was walking up and down between the rows of slanting boards with blueprints, tracing sheets and rolls of paper on them, in the designers' and draughtsmen's office of Ural Project Builders of which he was in charge. He soon got into the swing of the work and managed to establish good business and friendly relations with the staff, most of whom were young people.

The new engineer drew them a vivid picture of what Zemogorsk would look like in a few years. Carried away by his enthusiasm for the new projects, the employees of Ural Project Builders now saw even the blueprints for such minor structures as foodstalls or sanitary centres as part of a significant and truly beautiful scheme to build up their town, a job which was both an honour and a joy.

Chudinov made an interesting suggestion which won everyone's approval. He proposed that the designs of dwellings, municipal buildings, school-houses and other structures shortly to go up in the city, particularly on the outskirts, should be hung up on the walls of the old barracks soon to be pulled down.

"You get my idea, friends?" Chudinov said. "The town's inhabitants will look at these designs and see the city of tomorrow. They will see through the old barrack walls representing the past into the shining future."

And true enough, the designs hung up in one of the town's oldest streets always attracted large crowds. People were glad to get a glimpse of the future of their growing town.

In the designers' and draughtsmen's office heads were now bent over their work. The office itself had been so scrubbed and cleaned on the demand of the new department head that it was as dazzling white as the snowy plains and snow-clad mountains outside its tall windows. A beautiful broad avenue traced on the sheets tacked to the draughtsmen's boards would soon stretch to these plains and mountains. Chudinov noticed a board over which no head was bending. He glanced at his watch.

"It's after lunch hour and Masha Bogdanova is late again, third time this week," he said. "That's going a bit too far!"

He was about to return to his desk when he heard Masha Bogdanova's voice behind him. She had just rushed in, her cheeks glowing from the frost and was instantly at her board.

"I hope you don't mind my coming a few minutes late now and then," she said to Chudinov. "We're training for a skiing tournament and I have always been allowed to take off some time for that. I hope to make up for it later."

"Later? Why, we're behind with our designs as it is. The club building blueprints are not ready yet. You're practising for a race, you say. Well, with the way things are going, we'll soon have to start one right here in the office. And look what a mess you've made of the drawing, that won't do."

He poked his finger angrily at one of the corners of the blueprint. Poor Masha turned a deep red.

One of the young girls in the office bent to her neighbour and said in the kind of whisper usually audible to the person for whose ear it is not intended, "A stuffy old crank, that's what he is!"

The young man she spoke to was a lanky bespectacled fellow with a mass of hair on his head.

"Just jealous because he can't ski himself," he replied, raking his fingers through his hair to adjust some stray locks.

Well, was there anything he could say now? Chudinov knew that he had earned for himself the reputation of being a ski hater and an enemy of sports in general. Foolish people! If they only knew the truth.

The day of the Annual Ski Tournament finally came. This was an extremely popular sports event, attracting skiers from miles and miles around. The course started as a narrow path in a grove near the town, ran up a steep slope and, after winding among the hills, cut through bumpy ground leading to the airport.

It was a day to which all the townsfolk had been looking forward eagerly. Chudinov was perhaps the only person who took no interest in

the event. His complete indifference was an affront to the younger members of the Ural Project Builders staff. Stepan had kept aloof from all arguments which revolved around the tournament which in those days was the talk of the town. And, of course, he was little concerned with the fact that Natasha Skuratova, the town's champion, had flatly refused to race. But what would you expect from a man grown crusty and old before his time?

But if Chudinov cared nothing for the coming tournament there was one little person in town who cared so much that his heart was ready to break at the thought that Natasha, his teacher, was not running in it. That little person was Seryozha Orlov. He was tremendously disappointed, for it seemed to him that there could be no race without Natasha in it. He was quite certain the tournament would be called off.

Seryozha was just of the age when children recognize no authority greater than that of their teachers'. Natasha was his first teacher and he was sure she knew everything—all the grammar and arithmetic rules; she could add up the longest sums in a jiffy, and as quickly subtract them, and could recite dozens of poems. He worshipped her. And to cap it all, his teacher, his own teacher, was the best skier in town. To Seryozha Natasha was the most wonderful, the most beautiful, the cleverest person in the world. There was nobody better, nobody braver than she—perhaps with the only exception of Comrade Voroshilov!

And now this awful thing was happening.... It had been hard enough for Seryozha to get over Natasha's defeat in Moscow. But now when that defeat could be blotted out, and Natasha could redeem her good name, she had refused to enter the competition.

On the day of the race, Seryozha, breaking the pledge of silence which the children of the boarding-school had taken, timidly approached his teacher.

"Couldn't you agree just this once, teacher? If you don't, Mayak is sure to lose, and won't you be sorry for it?"

"You better tell me if you've solved your problems for tomorrow?" Natasha countered, trying to look strict.

That was not playing fair, Seryozha thought. You could easily get the better of anyone like that. He pouted, shaking his head sullenly.

"You haven't? Go ahead and do them. And I hope you'll let me solve my own problems, is that clear?" said Natasha grimly.

Seryozha turned away frowning and embarrassed, but in a minute he was back at Natasha's side.

"But mayn't we take a look at the race for just a while?" he asked.

The little boy cast a sidelong glance at Natasha. Would she think him disloyal for wanting to go, he wondered.

But Natasha merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course you may watch the race if you wish to."

The week before, the staff of Chudinov's office had decided to work on Sunday to have their blueprints out in time and not to let down the builders. But when Chudinov arrived at the office on Sunday he did not find a single soul there.

His eye caught a notice attached by a slip of wood to the lamp in the middle of the room. It explained everything. He read:

"BIG ANNUAL SKI EVENT!
ZEMOGORSK SKI TOURNAMENT!
EVERYBODY OUT ON SKIS!"

For a moment Chudinov was amused. Practically all his life he had been one of the most ardent and active propagandists of just that call: "Everybody Out on Skis!" And now everybody was out on skis and

he was left all by himself with a pile of unfinished designs that must be got out in time.

A minute later Chudinov heard the strains of martial music penetrating from the street through the large window with its gleaming moire coat of frost. Star-topped flag-poles glided above the windowsill on a level with the first floor. The ski teams were on their way to the course. After glancing round to make sure that he was alone, Chudinov stepped up to the window and, standing behind the curtain, scrutinized the skiers critically.

"The technique's bad here," he noted to himself. From long habit as a coach he gave vent to such remarks as—"Is that the way to put your foot forward? Skiing is not wading in sand! Say, you over there, have you got a stiff arm or something?" Then recollecting himself suddenly:

"What business of mine is it? Yet I could.... Comrade Chudinov, I call you to order, quit that talk!" It was a trick of his to issue commands to himself.

He returned to his desk. "Why the devil did I come here?" he asked himself. "They're all crazy about skiing in this place. Well, Carichev, old boy, wait till I lay my hands on you!" He unfolded a rolled sheet of paper, tacked to his board, took a slide rule and began to work. The rule with its gauge resembled a ski run. Annoyed with himself beyond measure, Chudinov banged his fist on the table and shook his head.

"That'll do for today," he said aloud to himself and plunged into his work.

Meanwhile, outside the town, the skiers were taking off. The route, marked with little flags, ran near the boarding-school which stood on a hill. The children had gathered to watch the skiers as they swept down.

"They're going pretty well," said Seryozha with the air of an expert, shifting his weight from one ski to another.

"Look, there's Masha Bogdanova. See how fast she goes!" Katya shouted with admiration.

The children yelled and cheered as Masha Bogdanova glided by, working energetically with the sticks. Their shouts followed her for a long time.

Then suddenly the children fell silent.

It hurt them to think that Natasha's bosom friend, not half as good on skis as their teacher, was running the race, while Natasha refused even to watch it. It was more than little Seryozha could stand. With a flash of sudden resolution he glanced round.

"Want me to go down the hill and catch up with her?" he cried, scrunching the hardened snow with his skis.

Katya cast him a look of scorn from under her hood.

"You're just boasting, Seryozha. I bet you anything you won't catch up with her."

"She's going round by the route and I know a short cut. Let's bet!"

"And what will teacher say? Remember the scolding you got the last time you did a thing like that?"

"Don't tell her. I'll only go a little way, down to the mine and back."

Working vigorously with his sticks, Seryozha went hurtling down the hill. The children stared at him in speechless wonder. Sidestepping slightly and crouching low on his skis, he skirted the thickets and was soon out of sight among the snow-drifts.

Chudinov was deep in his work, yet now and then he would shoot a glance in the direction of the radio, each time stoically resisting the temptation to plug it. When at last his curiosity got the better of him, he heard the announcer say: "... latest report from the ski run. Mayak,

weakened by the absence of its best runner, is falling behind Raduga, on the other hand. . . .”

He turned it off.

A snowstorm rose suddenly, as it often happens in the northern part of the Urals. The air instantly became filled with the hiss of whirling snow. From under the moving drifts tufts of last year's grass peeped out. Heaps of snow rose round the thickets. All at once the sky was obscured by dark grey shreds of murk and the short winter day began to fade rapidly. The telegraph wires whined shrilly and ominously and the wind whistled madly in the open spaces between the electric poles stretching from the town to the mines. At the starting place, a streamer, torn loose by the wind at one end, snapped into the air with the swishing sound, and the violent gusts of wind swept down the streets.

In less than ten minutes everything around was one great blur of cold, madly swirling snow, with the frenzied howling of the wind drowning all sounds.

The children were finishing their evening tea in the cosy dining-hall of their school.

Natasha was upstairs in her room, busy correcting the children's homework. Straight and slanting, broad and narrow, the letters danced before her eyes. At the same time, her ear was trained so well that she knew exactly what the children were doing below in the dining-hall.

Natasha did not mind the noise the children were making. It seemed natural to her to hear that noise and it was as much a part of her life as the constant rustling of the trees outside the school windows. She was genuinely fond of children. When she herself was at school she liked playing with the younger children and was considered an excellent Young Pioneer leader for the junior forms. Natasha did not find children “amusing” or “sweet.” She loved them for their own sake, and she knew that healthy children could not help being noisy.

Any kind of prolonged stillness put them under constraint. She tried her best to understand the mentality of children. To her their minor offences were never proof of a corrupt nature. Their little tricks were not evidence of cunning or disobedience or stubbornness. She was strict but wisely so. It was one of her principles to be always truthful with her pupils no matter what it may cost her. And she had a way of compelling the worst liars among the children to make a clean breast of things and reform. Her firm belief was that at heart children were good and noble.

It was now suspiciously quiet in the dining-hall. And Natasha knew that the worst racket raised by a gathering of children boded far less evil than a prolonged silence. Natasha now had a presentiment that something unpleasant had happened. She rose quickly and made her way down to the dining-hall. Some of the children had already finished their milk and cake.

"May we be excused from the table, teacher?" they asked.

Natasha looked at the table to see if the children had done justice to their meal, and if any of the naughty ones had hidden away bits of cake behind their plates. Her gaze fell on a plate where neither the cake nor the glass of milk was touched.

"Whose seat is this, children?" she asked.

There was no answer for some time. Then up went little Katya's hand. She tried to say something but her lips quivered and she broke into tears. That was a signal for all the other children in the dining-hall to start crying. They sobbed loudly and in unison, looking at Natasha with horror through their tears. Natasha knew at once that she could expect the worst. A minute later she was at the telephone hastily calling the Physical Culture Committee Chairman.

"Is this the Committee? Who's that?... Natasha Skuratova speaking. I'm calling from the boarding-school. One of our little boys is

missing. He went after the skiers. What's that? Everyone's ordered to turn back because of the storm? The boy is not with them? You don't know him?... His name is Seryozha Orlov."

A number of aerosleighs had started out from the mining district in the direction of the ski course to bring back the skiers. With their propellers whining, the sleighs cut through the storm, churning up clouds of snow. Swept by the wind, the little marking flags lay lolling and scuttling over the rising snow-drifts. The murk was rapidly growing thicker and lay heavy and leaden over the land.

Each time a skier was halted on the course, the motor was switched off. "The skiing tournament has been called off owing to stormy weather!" came through a megaphone. "Skiers are ordered to return to the mines where buses await them!"

An hour later, one bus after another was pulling up at the Novy Ural Hotel. Jumping out of the buses, the skiers quickly rushed to the hotel lobby, rubbing their frozen hands and cheeks and stamping their feet to warm up.

"It's good they sent the sleighs for us," said Masha Bogdanova, cupping her hands and blowing warm air into them. "We'd have had some time of it. What a snowstorm!"

Uncle Fedya called the roll.

"Comrades, let's see if anyone's missing. Abolin? Present? Anulini-chev? Here? Bogdanova? Oh, there you are," he went on calling name after name.

Gusts of snow beat against the window-panes. At times they were so violent they seemed to be shaking the hotel. "Safronova, Selishchev," called Uncle Fedya, "Skura.... Oh, I forgot, she didn't race today." He had just struck her name off when Natasha's voice came from behind the crowd.

"I'm here ... only on a different matter."

"A little too late in the day, isn't it, Natasha?" Masha Bogdanova said caustically.

"Comrades, I came for your.... How can you talk that way? Just think what's happened," Natasha's low chest voice, usually so calm, broke.

"What's the use of talking about it now?" said Uncle Fedya with a touch of mockery in his voice.

"What's the matter with all of you? Why won't you hear why I've come?" Natasha was on the point of explaining things but then with a gesture of impatience turned sharply on her heel.

That very moment Aunt Lipa shoved everybody aside and approached Uncle Fedya. She looked troubled.

"I just had a call from the Committee. A boy is missing from the boarding-school. He went after you and must have lost his way in the storm."

All eyes turned to the spot where Natasha had just been standing. But too late—they saw her disappear swiftly behind the glass plates of the revolving door and caught a glimpse of her as she passed the windows in the dim light of the street-lamp. She was swallowed up by the darkness. The door continued to revolve—that was all that reminded them that Natasha had just been in the room.

All at once they made for the door but were caught in its sides. When the young people finally found themselves in the street, there was no sign of Natasha. In vain they shouted to her to stop.

"Things are not going smoothly," Uncle Fedya kept muttering to himself.

Masha Bogdanova clasped her cheek in despair.

"We're a fine lot. Natasha came to ask our help and we scoffed at her. Now she's out on her skis—she'll kill herself in this stormy weather. What are we going to do about it? I suggest we follow her."

Someone made one more attempt to call Natasha back but the voice was drowned out by the wind.

"Abolin, call up the mines and the airport at once," ordered Uncle Fedya. "Tell them to send search parties and get the radio station to broadcast about the missing boy."

Ten minutes later, carrying lighted torches, the skiers plunged one after another into the raging storm. Intermittent mine whistles and screaming sirens rent the air. The signals would die down only to rise again to mingle with the fury of the storm. They were meant to help the search parties.

After the skiers had gone, Olympiada Gavrilovna, fearing the little barber may take it into his head to go after them and catch cold, quickly slipped his overshoes into the cupboard. After locking it, she thrust the key into her pocket. This done, she crossed her huge arms and took up a position at the door with a "Thou shalt not pass" expression on her face. And it was here that the poor barber came upon her.

"If you think you can stop me from following the skiers, you're very much mistaken," said the little barber, looking at her, something which made him crane his neck till it hurt.



Silently he tied a muffler round his throat, raised the beaver collar of his coat and resolutely walked to the corner where his skis were.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing to me and to yourself? Are you going in that cold without your overshoes?" Olympiada Gavrilovna desperately swung open the cupboard door and flung the overshoes at the barber's feet with such force that they bounced up into the air. They were of the kind that had rubber soles and cloth tops and were labelled "farewell youth" by sportsmen.

The little barber pulled them on quickly, snapped the clasps, grabbed his skis and ran out after the departing skiers.

CHAPTER 6

THE RESCUE

Chudinov, engrossed in his work, paid no attention to the storm outside. He only rose once to draw the curtains and prevent the wind from penetrating into the room through the chinks. His work was going well. He was looking forward with pleasure to Monday morning when he would first give his draughtsmen and girls a slight calling down (it wouldn't do to be too hard on them for he knew that a true lover of skiing would not miss an important tournament for anything in the world) and then he would show them the results of his own work for the day.

Just as these thoughts flashed through his mind, a strange whining sound came from the street rising above the howling wind and the angry beating of the snow against the walls of the building. The storm is growing fiercer, thought Chudinov. He pricked up his ears to catch

once more the strange moaning sound—it grew now louder, now fainter, dying away and then growing more intense. It was like a loud intermittent throbbing. Chudinov divined it to be the sound of factory whistles, at times quite distinct, at others drowned by the roar of the storm. A moment later he thought he heard the sound of an alarm. He walked over to the window but could see nothing in the grey swirling murk blurring the light of the street-lamps. Chudinov plugged in the radio.

“... ski search parties are rallying at the Novy Ural Hotel,” came the announcer’s voice. “They will comb the entire neighbourhood round the mines and airport for the missing child.”

The voice grew silent. Chudinov waited, hoping there would be a repetition of the announcement. And sure enough it soon came over again.

“Attention. Zemogorsk Radio calling. We repeat our announcement. A little boy from the local boarding-school has lost his way in the storm in the neighbourhood of the mines and airport. Several skiing parties have gone to look for the missing child. A search party has also started out from the airport. The ski search parties will rally at the Novy Ural Hotel.”

Chudinov squared his shoulders. He felt a shooting pain in his knee joint. But it passed as quickly as it came. Knowing that he must act at once, he walked out of the office.

When he approached the hotel he found groups of skiers at the entrance, the wind whipping the flames of their torches. He went quickly up to his room and changed into his checkered blazer.

“Have you a pair of skis to spare?” Chudinov asked as he dashed out of the hotel.

Masha Bogdanova heard his voice and glided to his side. She could hardly believe her eyes when in the shifting light of the torches she recognized her department head.

"You? Why, you'll find it hard to.... You can't...."

"We'll talk about that later," he cut her short. "Where can I get a pair of skis?"

"Have you ever been out on skis, comrade?" Uncle Fedya asked. He had already had an earful from many people of the new department head's attitude to skiing.

"I have," Chudinov replied curtly.

"And how did you find it?" asked Uncle Fedya, really curious. "The country here is very treacherous."

"Get me a map, will you?" Chudinov said sharply.

With a shrug of the shoulders Uncle Fedya raised to the light of his torch a board with a map on it.

"See we don't have to send out a rescue party for you," he said.

"I can take care of myself very well, thank you," he replied. "Clear the road!" he shouted peremptorily in a ringing voice, making everybody start back involuntarily, and plunged into the raging storm.

"Just watch him ski, he knows his business," exclaimed the astonished Uncle Fedya. "He's been fooling us all along, fellows."

It is a ghastly thing to be out in the open country alone in a raging snowstorm. But with all the stubborn spirit in her Natasha pressed on against the wall of whirling snow. Coming in mad flurries, the clammy snow whipped her face, blinded her, stopped her breath, threatened to sweep her off her feet. But she went ahead, crouching low on her skis. Where she could, she followed the markers, though often losing her bearings and taking heart again from the signals she heard. One minute she would be sinking into a hollow and the next climbing a height.

Natasha was a skilled skier. She could not recall when she had first learned to ski. It must have been at about the same time she learned to

walk. And so, skiing long distances was child's play to her. Sometimes for weeks on end she had to ski to school. One might say skiing was almost as habitual to her as walking. But she had never thought skiing would one day bring her fame and then later disgrace. It was several years ago that a visiting sports instructor noticed her at a Young Communist League rally and persuaded her to enter a regional ski competition. That was when it had all begun. But now it was all over. Skis had once more become merely a convenient means of travelling from place to place or going out for fresh air for her own pleasure.

Natasha had often been caught in snowstorms while skiing, but it had been nothing like today. She regretted that she had gone on alone without waiting for the others who, she was certain, were now out looking for Seryozha.

In the blinding mist of clammy snow everything seemed obliterated. The dark clouds of driving snow and the howling wind filled every inch of space around. Natasha cupped her hands and shouted, trying to make her voice heard above the fury of the storm. But in vain.

"Seryozha! Se-ryo-zha! Seryozha Orlov!" Natasha called over and over again.

Suddenly she ceased to call. She held her breath and listened. From somewhere, it seemed at first from afar, yet perhaps it was quite near, came what seemed a whisper: "Yo-ho!" Natasha turned and hurried in the direction from which the call came. The snow swept her face, momentarily blinding her. She shut her eyes and turned her face away, trying hard to catch her breath. Before she realized it, the ground under her fell away and she was sliding down to the edge of a snow ledge. Beneath was a gulley. The snow was slipping from under her feet and she was being precipitated down with a small avalanche to the bottom of the gulley. Luckily, though the sides were sheer, the gulley itself was not deep. She injured her arm as she fell. With difficulty she scrambled

to her feet and discovered to her horror that one of the skis was broken. She knew that in stormy weather like that she could not walk a mile without skis. As though sensing her utter helplessness, the storm, it seemed to Natasha, was now raging with redoubled force. Though her arm pained terribly, she managed to pick her way out of the gulley and again called Seryozha. And again she heard "Yo-ho." Struggling through the snow-drifts reaching almost to her waist, she followed the sound. Something dark, a snow-swept huddle, loomed ahead of her. It suddenly began to move.

A minute later Natasha was lifting Seryozha up by the shoulders. She tried to get the half-frozen boy to his feet, but he was too cold and weak to stand and kept tottering down. Moving his lips, he uttered some faint sounds.

"You go, teacher," he muttered. "And I'll lie for a while and rest here."

Natasha tried to warm his hands with her breath and rubbed his cheeks with her mittens. She shook him and brushed the snow off him.

"Seryozha, little darling, do you think you can walk?"

"My feet just won't move," he muttered guiltily in a faint voice. "You go home, teacher. Don't worry about me. I'm no longer afraid now that you've found me. I'm so glad, so very glad you've found me. Will you forgive me for getting lost? I didn't do it on purpose. And I promise never to break rules again."

The snow was piling up higher and higher around them. Natasha knew they couldn't remain long in one spot, exposed as they were to the violent wind. Some sort of shelter had to be found at once. Turning her back to the wind, against which she could lean as against a wall, she began tying Seryozha's skis together with her muffler to make a sort of sleigh. She put the little boy on it and tried to pull. But the snowstorm was gaining in fury and Natasha had to fight her way through violent

gusts of what seemed solidified snow. The wind battered them and drove them with a whirling and lashing speed. Natasha's strength was gradually giving way. It seemed to her that she was caught in huge madly revolving doors from which there was no escape.

She kept tripping, sinking waist-deep into the snow, falling and struggling with difficulty to her feet.

Then she fell and had no strength to rise.

Skiers with pocket flashlights and torches held aloft were combing the country from opposite directions—from the town and airport—along both sides of the ski track. They divided into two groups which would eventually meet at a given point. The flames of their torches and the beams of the flashlights were hardly visible in the murky mist raised by whirling snow.

Picking its way along a patch of country quite a distance away from the snow-swept ski route, now almost completely obliterated, the beam of one of the flashlights suddenly alighted on a freshly-broken twig. Near by were little hollows in the snow—the remains of half-erased tracks. For some time the light falling from the flashlight darted round and round. The madly swirling specks of snow was all that the feverishly groping beam could catch. As it stopped on the twig of a thicket, it revealed the pompon of a child's hood caught on a thorn.

The beam travelled swiftly along the faint traces of the course now almost on a level with the ground. For a second or two it went circling round and round. Then with a quiver it suddenly stopped as it fell upon a pair of children's skis half buried in the snow. The beam continued darting back and forth more feverishly than ever in the dark mist until it caught the outlines of two closely huddled figures as white as though cast in Plaster of Paris. Shielding little Seryozha from the wind, Nata-

sha was sitting behind a snow-drift, dozing lightly, with the boy in her arms. Both were almost completely buried in snow and both in a state of semi-consciousness.

Natasha was brought to her senses by a burning sensation in her mouth. She had a fit of coughing, and tried to brush aside a hand which was forcing some brandy down her throat. The light was flashed into her face. Blinded by it, she could see nothing. But through the whirling wind and snow she caught a man's words.

"Can you get to your feet? I'll manage to carry the boy. Lean on me for support. There's a hut near by. I've put a marker near it."

"Who are you?" Natasha asked faintly, hardly able to move her frozen lips.

"It doesn't matter, you'll know later," came the voice, speaking, as it were, out of the storm and darkness. "Don't talk now. Breathe into the muffler."

A warm knitted scarf was thrown around Natasha's throat. She could feel it against her face, protecting her from the wind. For one short instant she caught a glimpse in the light of the torch of the sleeve of a checkered blazer with a football-shaped button on the cuff. Remaining invisible in the darkness, the man lifted Seryozha in his arms and helped Natasha to her feet. Shielding both from the driving wind with his shoulder, he trudged to a small tumble-down hunter's hut. Shortly after, Natasha and Seryozha were safe in the hut, the gloom around it was pierced by numerous lights. It was surrounded by skiers. A hollow voice was heard above the howling of the storm.

"This way, this way, I've found them."

The man who spoke began to signal with his flashlight. The skiers hastened towards him. The searchlights on the aerosleighs swept the little flimsy snow-blanketed hut. A light picking its way through the dark swirling clouds of the storm flooded the inside of the



hut. Natasha, already her old self, was brushing the snow off Seryozha who, only half-realizing what was happening, was hugging her tight.

First to reach the rescued pair were Masha Bogdanova, Uncle Fedya and the inevitable Donat Remizkin. In a dazzling aureole of lights directed at their backs from the searchlights of the sleighs they were just about to dash into the hut when their entrance was blocked by what seemed at first glance to be a snow heap. But when Uncle Fedya, a bulky young man, stepped on that snow heap it moaned faintly:



“Ouch! Get off my foot, it’s frozen as it is!”

The glare of the searchlights revealed Drizhik’s bent back. Stiff with cold, the little barber crawled out of the snow heap which turned out to be a stack of frozen straw.

Natasha could hardly believe her eyes. What a tragicomic end to the nightmare she’d been through.

“So it was you who brought us here,” she said. “I thought we would freeze to death. Thank you.”

The storm was dying down, the wind growing calmer, and it was no longer snowing.

Masha Bogdanova pressed her face to her friend's cold cheeks, embraced her and shook Seryozha.

"Oh, you little devils, how much trouble you've caused us. Natasha, darling, was it really he who..." she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Well, he has luck! No wonder he follows you around everywhere. So, he's found you two and brought you to this hut. Three cheers for Drizhik!"

The little barber, shivering and blinking from the searchlights, was stamping the snow off his feet, hardly aware of what had happened.

"What's that you've said?" he asked, playing with his pocket torch. "Perhaps I did it unconsciously. I don't know anything. I shall try to recall what happened."

Donat Remizkin made his way to Natasha's side.

"Try to remember who reached you first. Who brought you here?" he took a pad out of his pocket. "We'll have his picture on the front page. What a story it'll make!"

Somebody tapped him lightly on the shoulder, Remizkin turned and saw Chudinov standing behind him. The engineer's eyes were glued to Natasha's face, now brightly illumined by the beams of the searchlights. He spoke in a whisper.

"I'm a newcomer in your town and don't know many people. That girl over there is Zinaida Avdoshina, isn't she?"

"Avdoshina?" Remizkin was astonished. "Why that's Natasha Skuratova, our ski champion, our 'Queen of the Snows.' Everybody knows her. Strange you haven't heard about her."

Rapidly Chudinov made his way out of the crowd of skiers.

Of course, it's the same girl, he thought. Things are going from bad to worse. But why Natasha Skuratova when as far as he remembered her name was Zinaida Avdoshina?

Donat Remizkin himself was somewhat at a loss and he thought Chudinov was just the man to advise him what to do.

"Do you think I ought to wire the story to Moscow?" he asked. "An event like this in our parts! A real example of little man turning hero. I'll call the report 'A Noble Exploit!' Or, better still, 'A Modest Hero.' Sounds good, doesn't it?"

Chudinov shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't talk of heroes at all. What difference does it make who rescued the pair? It's not a competition. The important thing is that everybody joined in the search. And all that matters now is that they've been found and are safe and sound."

"A nice way to talk," said Donat Remizkin reproachfully. "I'd like to see you doing a thing like that!"

"Well, maybe I have," said Chudinov. He stepped forward again and peered at Natasha who seemed completely recovered from her experience. Her cheeks were rosy, somebody had thrown a wadded coat over her shoulders, and she was wrapping Seryozha in a warm scarf.

"That's her, there's no doubt about it," muttered Chudinov to himself and stepped aside to escape a beam of light. "Skuratova? How's that? In Moscow it was 'Avdoshina of Vologda'! Puzzling all that."

Remizkin was already hard at work on the bewildered Drizhik, hastily jotting things down in his pad.

"Can't you remember what happened?"

"Well, to be sure . . . it was really quite simple," the stunned barber mumbled. "I went in this direction, came to the hut here and stumbled into what looked like a snow heap. Let's talk about it another time. I'm too cold just now."

The searchlights were suddenly switched off, the place was plunged in pitch blackness, cutting short the interview.

CHAPTER 7

HAVING IT OUT

Chudinov returned late to his hotel, his leg in pain—the strain of the long ski run into the woods had been too much for it—and himself baffled by the unexpected discovery he had made.

So, the rescued girl was Natasha Skuratova, but why had she been pointed out to him as Zinaida Avdoshina in Moscow? He had no doubt now that it was she—the beauty he had seen on the ski track in Podrezkovo near Moscow. He remembered her face well. It had distinction—the sharply defined cheek-bones, the slightly tilted nose, the grey eyes with an expression of wilful childishness, and the pleasing, yet defiant, line of the slightly pouting mouth.

Curse the storm! It will certainly be stupid now to pose as a sports hater, or, at any rate, as one indifferent to skiing. Surely they must have noticed his grip and style, if they understood such things. And to top it all, this strange discovery. It appeared that the splendid skier he had seen in Moscow was not Zinaida Avdoshina at all, and she was not in Vologda, but Natasha Skuratova, living in the very town he had chosen for his new home. What if Yevgeny had deliberately played a trick on him in Moscow?

On his way back to town, Chudinov tried to keep aloof from the others. Foolish as it may seem, he still hoped that no one had noticed him in the general commotion. As noiselessly as possible, he stood up the skis Uncle Fedya had given him in the lobby of the hotel. But the ever-watchful Olympiada Gavrilovna was promptly at his side.

“You went, too?” she said. “I hope you haven’t harmed your leg. Everybody seems to have gone mad. And what do you think of Drizh-ik? They tell me it was he who rescued them. Just think of it! He brought them to the hut. And he won’t admit it, just says he doesn’t

remember. [That's Drizhik all over. Very shy, but brave. Risked his health, even his life I would say—and keeps it all to himself.]”

She was on the point of returning to her little cubby-hole when she suddenly remembered something and stopped.

“We’re overcrowded and we’ve had to put up a new arrival in your room,” she said. “It’s only temporary.”

It was dark in Chudinov’s room, except for the light from the street. The storm had long spent its fury and the whirling snow had settled down. The soft even stream of the light coming through the window made all the objects in the room quite discernible.

Chudinov did not turn on the light and undressed quietly in the dark so as not to wake the new lodger. After hanging up his clothes on the back of a chair—not in the wardrobe because he did not want to make a noise—he tiptoed into the bathroom. There he could be heard snorting a little under the shower and then grunting as he dried himself with a towel. As he stepped quietly into the room, he accidentally knocked over a chair. It fell with a bang.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“I don’t care if you bring the whole house down,” came the unexpected reply. “Snap on the light and stop playing blindman’s buff!”

The light came on. Chudinov stared open-mouthed, hardly believing his eyes.

“You!”

“Yours truly!”

Chudinov’s eyes were not deceiving him. I had warned him that sooner or later my job would take me to Zemogorsk. My newspaper got a cue that they were behind the mine construction schedule here, and I was instructed to drop into Zemogorsk on my way back from Sverdlovsk.

Our plane landed in Zemogorsk when the snowstorm was at its height. And as the blizzard prevented me from setting out for the town right away, I decided to spend the night in the airport's waiting-room, where I was provided with a comfortable bed. Weary from the trip, I fell asleep at once. After midnight, when the storm had abated, I awoke and got a lift to town in an aerosleigh. On the way, I heard the story of the rescue. Everybody seemed to think that the little barber from the hotel was the hero of the day.

When I arrived at the hotel, Olympiada Gavrilovna gave me the choice of two rooms, each with a single occupant. When I heard that Chudinov was staying in one of them, I naturally asked to be put up there.

"Well, for the love of..." Chudinov plumped down on the bed opposite to mine. "What a night of surprises. I'm glad to see you here, Yevgeny. But I must warn you that I'm going to have things out with you."

"All right, we'll talk in the morning. I'm dead tired. I had a very hard time getting here from the airport. The road was covered deep with snow. By the way, I've already heard that you're a great success in your field here."

In an instant Chudinov had shifted the weight of his well-knit, muscular body from his bed to the edge of mine. He bent slightly over me.

"Trying to change the subject? I suppose you wouldn't like me to tell you that it was you who got me out here!"

"Very sporting I'm sure of you to put the blame on me when you were so keen yourself on getting out of Moscow!"

"Apparently you've forgotten what you told me about this place—a backwoods, a bears' hunt, roaming wolves, skiing absolutely unknown! The place swarms with skiers, I tell you. I don't think I've seen a single pair of feet without skis. No sooner does a Zemogorsk baby get out of its swaddlings than it puts on skis and keeps them on till goodness knows

when. The old folks here are almost as good as the young. Why did you have to hand me that line in Moscow about skiing being practically unknown in these parts? What did you have up your sleeve? Speak up and stop making faces."

"Go easy! It was your own heart that was set on Zemogorsk."

"So, you intend to go on fooling me. And now maybe you'll tell me Zinaida Avdoshina lives here."

"And what has she got to do with it? She lives in Vologda, trains there. And recently she's made a good showing at a regional ski tournament."

"Cut out that tomfoolery! Do you take me for an idiot or something? I'm quite serious about this. You ask me—what has Zinaida Avdoshina got to do with this? You know well enough that it was Natasha Skuratova, the local ski champion, that we watched at the meet in Podrezkovo and you went and told me it was Zinaida Avdoshina."

"Maybe there was some mistake about the numbers in the list. But it's too late to talk of it now. It's fate, Stepan."

"I think I shall take hold of Fate by the scruff of his neck and throw him out of my room. What d'you say to that?"

For safety's sake I moved closer to the wall.

"I'll say that Fate, too, has its setbacks. Better tell me if the people around here are still in the dark about you?"

Chudinov heaved a sigh.

"So far they have been, but I'm afraid I've given myself away today. I suppose you've heard what's happened. A kid from the local boarding-school and his teacher—and that's your Skuratova—got lost in the storm. They were actually in peril. So, of course, I couldn't let a principle stand in the way, and I got on a pair of skis. The people around were amazed to see me do that, for I'd been posing here as a ski hater all along."

"Oh," I said eyeing Stepan closely. He looked quite disconcerted. "They had a narrow escape, I hear, but were rescued all right."

"Yes," Stepan replied, "they were. Nothing really difficult about it—the territory's not large and it's easy to get one's bearings. Moreover, it was combed so thoroughly that it was natural that someone should have eventually come on the pair."

Raising myself slightly on my elbows, I peered into his face.

"Not difficult, you say? But who was the first to find them or, as you say, to 'come on' them in the storm?"

Chudinov rose, yawning and stretching himself.

"Some person from one of the search parties. And so many had gone out, almost the whole town. My knee joint's bothering me again. Say, what are you staring at me like that for?"

I looked at him scrutinizingly.

He had changed a little since I saw him last—perhaps grown a little heavier without his usual amount of training. Still he looked perfectly fit.

"Why do you keep staring at me like that?" he repeated grimly.

"I'm recalling certain things from the past, Karelia, for example."

Chudinov turned on me sharply.

"Have you forgotten our compact, Yevgeny? Another word and you'll clear out and I don't care where you spend the night. And, my esteemed gentleman of the press, will you be kind enough to explain to me what suddenly turned Zinaida Avdoshina into Natasha Skuratova and why does she live here in Zemogorsk and not in Vologda where she belongs? And what's all this mix-up with their numbers? Is it your work?"

So, I thought, the hour of reckoning had come. I began vigorously shaking up the pillow for the night.

"Do you think your friend is such a powerful personage as to change

numbers in starting lists and have girls transferred overnight from one town to another and alter their names into the bargain? You pay me too high a compliment. All I can say now is that I'm sleepy. Good night!"

"Sleepy, are you?" he buried my head into the pillow several times. "Well, you've played a trick on me. And I, fool that I am, fell into your trap. Some day I'll remind you of it."

"Well, I like my friends to remind me of the good I do them."

"Good? You think you can put it over me like that?"

"I don't think anything just at present, nor do I hear anything. I'm fast asleep. And I'm having a wonderful dream about you training Natasha Skuratova in the country round Zemogorsk. I can see her ski...."

But before I could finish the sentence Chudinov began smothering me with his pillow. Somehow, I felt the storm had subsided in him.

I was quite exhausted and soon fell asleep.

The sound of a falling chair awakened me. Stepan seemed to be making a habit of knocking against chairs. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him take off his checkered blazer with the football-shaped buttons from the back of the chair.

He looked closely at it. One of the buttons was missing and a loose thread hung in its place. He began twisting the thread round his finger.

"What a shame!" I heard him grumble to himself. "All these years I've never missed a button. And now there is no hope of getting one like it." He bent down to look under the bed.

"Lost it out there, of course. Pity!" he mumbled again.

I closed my eyes tight and pretended to be fast asleep.

CHAPTER 8

THE INITIAL ON THE SCARF

On entering the building of the *Zemogorsk Worker* as a guest reporter in the town, I decided to pay a duty call to the editor. I heard loud buzzing noises coming from all the rooms which were as yet empty. The telephones seemed to be bouncing with impatience, ready to tear away from the wires.

The editor, an elderly man, was dressed very warmly, in felt boots and a jacket of heavy material, with fountain pens, blue pencils and rulers protruding from his breast pockets.

The telephone rang on his desk. He grabbed the receiver angrily with one hand and with the other removed some cotton from his ear.

"Yes, the editor speaking!" He motioned to me to be seated. "Yes, this is the *Zemogorsk Worker*." Here he took obvious pleasure in relieving himself of a long explosive sneeze. "What is it you're saying? Somebody saved somebody. And you don't know who the somebody is who saved somebody." He sneezed again and then again very loudly. "The whole town is ringing me about that somebody. You're interrupting our work. Marta Martinovna!" he shouted to his secretary through the door. "For goodness' sake please answer the calls and switch over the telephone to your line."

He banged down the receiver. Buzz went the telephone again. He picked up the receiver and this time merely placed it gingerly on the table, letting it buzz away quietly. I took advantage of the pause to introduce myself.

"A pleasure, indeed," said the editor cordially. "Take a look round the town. You'll see the construction is in full swing. That new engineer from Moscow is stepping up things. There are very wide prospects in

building up our town. And here I've got to listen to all sorts of nonsense over the telephone. Somebody's saved somebody and that somebody that's done the saving is keeping everybody guessing."

A moment later Donat Remizkin, very much flustered, dashed into the room.

"Good morning, Comrade Khvorobei. "I've got a splendid story for the paper. Wanted to bring it last night but it was late."

"Oh!" the editor sighed wearily.

"It's a 200-line story," Remizkin went on. "The headline is 'Girl and Child Rescued' and the sub-head, 'A Modest Hero.' You've heard the story, I suppose."

"I've been hearing of nothing else since early morning," replied the exasperated editor. "Who rescued whom?"

Remizkin had expected the question and intended to answer it very effectively. He went to the door and flung it open. In the doorway stood Natasha Skuratova. She was rather pale and a tired look had taken the sparkle out of her eyes. Yet, for all that, she was lovely to look at.

"She's the one who was rescued!" Donat Remizkin explained. "She and her pupil, Seryozha Orlov."

Natasha eyed us perplexedly.

"There is something I want to tell you."

The editor cut her short with a gesture.

"It'll have to wait!" He indicated an empty chair. "Everybody seated? Good! And now that we know who's been rescued, tell us who did the rescuing."

This, too, apparently was a question Remizkin was prepared to answer—and quite dramatically.

"With pleasure. I've arranged everything. Comrade Drizhik," he cried, "will you please come in."

Instantly a side door opened and the little barber stepped into the room.

He was not quite himself, absently crushing his cap in his hands and pressing it to his chest. Seeing a chair, he dropped into it.

"That's your man," said Remizkin highly pleased with himself. "Comrade Drizhik, since early morning I have been looking into the case. Last night I was on the scene of the crime, excuse me, I mean on the scene of the heroic deed. The evidence all points to you as being the murd... I mean the hero, the rescuer. Yet you refuse to plead guilty, rather to own up to this heroic deed. You..."

The editor adjusted his glasses and looked sternly at Remizkin. "Make it short!" he told him. "You're holding up the publication of the paper." Then addressing Drizhik, he asked, "You don't deny having rescued this girl here and the little boy, do you?"

The little barber jumped to his feet. Still crushing his cap, and clasping it to his chest.

"If you think I really did..." he mumbled at a loss. "I was positively determined to rescue them. That's a fact, and when ... that is, when I saw that..."

Natasha interrupted him.

"I do wish you'd listen to what I have to say on the matter, comrades."

"Well, go ahead and say it!" The editor banged the table with his pencil. "But make it short. We're holding up the paper. There is some important news from the concentration mill. And here is a special correspondent from Moscow."

Remizkin shot a respectful glance in my direction. Natasha looked at me with curiosity.

"Isn't it high time we got the matter straight?" the editor continued. "Did you do the rescuing?"

"It's hard to say..." mumbled the confused Drizhik. "My mind is not clear as to what really happened. I did see the hut, but..."

"He won't talk out of sheer modesty," Remizkin whispered into the editor's ear.

"H'm. Psychologically, it's clear. Anyhow, we'll print the story. Get a good-sized photograph of the man!"

"All the same there is a point I want cleared up," Natasha insisted. "I certainly wish to thank you for..."

The editor had ceased listening.

"Never mind that. We're pressed for time. Everything's quite clear. We're late with the paper as it is. Thank him," he said, poking his finger at the little barber.

Remizkin was now working with lightning speed. He got the editor's chair out into the middle of the room and pushed the stunned Drizhik into it. He propped up his camera on its tripod and thrust a huge lamp into the hands of the amazed Natasha to hold. After an instant's hesitation, he jumped up on a chair and focussed the lens on the little barber.

"Wait! Let me have the lamp." He snatched it from Natasha and gave it to the editor. "You hold it. Natasha, I want you in the picture, too. Stand there! Hold everything! Not a word! One ... two..."

Drizhik froze in the proud but casual pose of a man accustomed to be photographed for the papers.

"Comrades!" Natasha cried, but both the editor and Remizkin motioned wildly to her not to move. "I've got something important to say. Now it is true that Comrade Drizhik was really under the straw..."

"On top!" the little barber corrected, speaking through his teeth, for he was afraid to move.

"Now you've spoiled everything. We'll have to take the picture all over again," said Remizkin.

"All right, on top," Natasha went on. "You were on top of the heap of straw. But then I discovered a scarf round my neck and it has the initial 'C' on it."

I almost gasped when Natasha produced the scarf. I knew it well. Everybody bent over it. And there it was—the initial "C."

"Is that your scarf, Comrade Drizhik?" Natasha asked the barber.

Remizkin stared for a moment at the initial on the scarf and seemed to have a brain wave. He looked as proud as the great chemist Mendeleev might have looked when he had at last given the world his Periodic Table of Elements or Prince Charming when he found that the lost slipper fitted Cinderella's dainty little foot.

"I've got it at last!" he cried. "That's the initial of the new engineer who pretended he couldn't ski and then went off with the search parties. Chudinov—'C' is the initial of his surname. As sure as anything, it's he. I'm off to his office."

With not as much as a glance at Drizhik, he made for the door, knocking over the camera on his way. It hit the editor and made him drop the lamp, which came down on the floor with a great crash.

"Oh well, that's that," said Drizhik, summing up the situation.

When Chudinov arrived at the office, he found everybody at their desks. Masha Bogdanova, greatly excited, stepped forward into the middle of the room. Behind her, peeping over her shoulder, stood the very young draughtswoman who had called Chudinov a crank and her neighbour with the mass of thick hair.

"We know all about you, Comrade Chudinov," Masha said.

Chudinov frowned at her. Well, he expected just this.

"All right, get it off your chest," he said.

"We all know now," Masha replied hurriedly, "that you held the U.S.S.R. ski championship. Don't deny it. Uncle Fedya found a 1939 copy of a magazine with your photographs in it."

Masha glanced over her shoulder. The thick-haired draughtsman was holding the magazine over her head. He opened it quickly. And there were the pictures of Stepan Chudinov, Merited Master of Sports and U.S.S.R. ski champion for 1939.

"Surely you won't refuse to coach us now." Masha smiled sweetly. "And you won't scold us any more, I hope?"

Chudinov laughed embarrassedly and looked away.

"Besides we know too that it was you who rescued Natasha Skuratova and little Seryozha though you're trying to keep it secret and letting us think it was the little barber."

Chudinov turned to speak to her when everyone in the office began talking all at once.

"No use deceiving us! We've had a call from the newspaper. They've discovered a scarf with your initial on it."

"What scarf? I've given up wearing scarves a long time ago," Chudinov said, surprised at this new turn of affairs. "Whoever told you all this? Well, I won't deny that I won the U.S.S.R. ski championship in 1939. As to the other thing, forget it."

"Why don't you own up? We're certain it was you. Remizkin will be here any minute now. He wants your photograph for the paper."

"My photograph? Why, comrades, you must have all gone out of your senses," Chudinov said. "No more of this. Let's get down to business. I have a new set of calculations."

As he turned to go into the adjoining office, he ran into Remizkin. The latter, camera in hand, was making ready to snap Chudinov.

"Oh, no, you don't!" cried Chudinov with a sudden burst of anger.



"It's no use, Comrade Chudinov," Remizkin was saying, "you've got to own up."

He was just as determined to have Chudinov's picture as Chudinov was determined he should not take it.

"We have proof," Donat went on, "there's your scarf with the initial 'C'." He waved the scarf almost in Chudinov's face.

"I see no initial," said Chudinov, casting a bewildered glance at the scarf.

"There it is. It's your initial."

"Nonsense, it may be anybody's." After a moment's reflection he



added, "I did have a scarf like this one once. But I dropped it overboard yachting on Lake Ladoga. That was in 1946. This may be a strange coincidence—but more likely it's all sheer nonsense."

"But it isn't nonsense. I want your photograph for the newspaper."

"Listen, my friend," Chudinov said, his anger surging. "The interview is over. Is that clear?"

"But it's your initial and your scarf, I tell you," Remizkin cried.

"Leave me alone," Chudinov said gruffly and walked out of the room.

TRACKING THE UNKNOWN HERO

Remizkin was terribly puzzled by the whole affair of the scarf. Chudinov had refused to enlighten him. When Donat made a second attempt to approach him, Chudinov told him to get out of the office and never again to bother him with such foolishness.

Tormented both by curiosity and by a feeling of guilt at having let his editor down, Remizkin came to me for advice, for he regarded me as an older and more experienced colleague.

"Chudinov is our man, isn't he?" he said looking inquiringly at me. "You're his friend and you can make him own up. If he objects to having his photograph in the newspaper, very well, we won't print it. We can write the story, without mentioning his full name, just calling him Engineer C. Not everybody will guess that it is he."

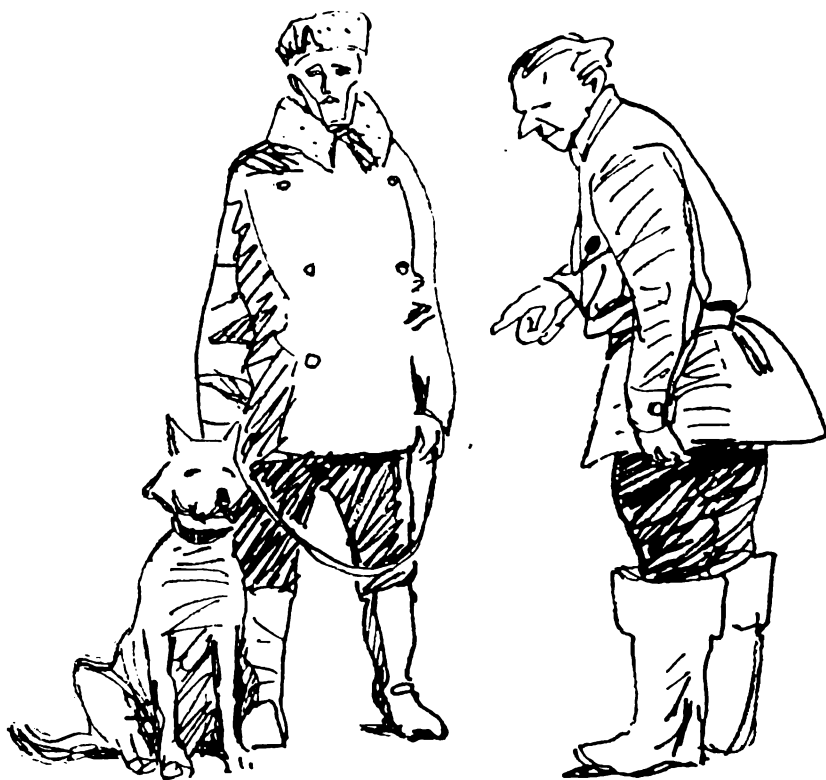
I could be of no help to the young reporter, for I knew Stepan's character only too well and this time his attitude was quite understandable. Deep in my heart I blessed the storm and the whole incident connected with it for having so propitiously brought Stepan and Natasha together, but I couldn't help sympathizing with him about the scarf. True, everything seemed to point to him as the rescuer of Natasha and the boy, but why did they have to keep harping on it and making a fuss.

I learned from Remizkin that he had been questioning Natasha, who told him that she had only a vague recollection of what happened that night. It was as though, she explained, everything had been blurred by the dark whirl of snow. Apparently she did not like the reporter's questioning either. Perhaps it was because this proud girl felt that she had again failed as a skier by having broken her ski?

A good thing that this man had turned up and saved her life. Obviously he was a very retiring and modest person, desiring no credit for his good deed. Another in his place would not have minded playing the hero. But to tell the truth, Natasha herself was dying to know who her mysterious saviour was—the man who had wrested her from the fury of the storm, thrown his scarf around her neck, picked up the little boy and carried him to safety. Natasha was thankful to him, but too proud to help to identify him if he himself seemed so eager to remain incognito.

As a last resort, Remizkin decided to enlist the assistance of the Criminal Investigation Department. The surprise of his colleagues on the newspaper may well be imagined when one day a C.I.D. man walked into the editor's office with a ferocious-looking police dog. He was a thin, swarthy fellow with a little black moustache and a round fur cap on his head. The huge animal he brought stretched itself out in the middle of the room and lay glaring distrustfully at the editor himself who soon began to feel exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Why hasn't it a muzzle on?" asked the editor in a frightened whisper.



"'Cause it's here on business," replied the visitor.

When the C.I.D. man was told what was wanted of him, he grew thoughtful, even a little sad.

"I doubt if we can help you," he said. "Our dogs are trained to track down criminals, thieves, murderers, but not heroes. Heroes and their good deeds are not in our line."

"I suppose, you're right," said the disappointed Remizkin.

Yet he insisted that the dog be shown the scarf. This important piece of evidence, however, had been handled by so many people in the last few days that the dog turned away in disgust and would not even sniff it.

"It's a real shame," the young reporter complained to me afterwards, "reams of volumes have been written on how to track down criminals—the libraries are full of them—but not a word about tracking down heroes. The most intricate mysteries have been unravelled and criminals brought to justice. But when it comes to tracking down a noble but overmodest man who has performed a heroic deed, you can get no help from anywhere."

Shortly afterwards Remizkin honoured me with another visit. The persevering young reporter had not given up hope of finding his man. He had fallen on a new trail. Although in his own mind he felt certain that Chudinov was the man he wanted, still he wished to eliminate other suspects. And so one day it occurred to him that he might have a talk with the chief of the airport. He learned that several transit planes had been held up in Zemogorsk on the night of the storm. And it turned out that five passengers had joined the ski search party that started out to meet the parties from the town. In the passenger lists of one of the planes Remizkin came across a name which began with the letter C.

"The chief of the airport assured me that he remembered the fellow very well," Donat said excitedly. "He was tall and broad-should-

dered, and he joined the skiers. In the morning he flew on to Vladivostok. There may be something in it, don't you think so? I think I'll wire Moscow. They may be able to trace his address through the passenger lists. What's your opinion, Comrade Carichev?"

He had got so much on my nerves during the last few days that I didn't care a bit whether he went after that new fellow or not, but I did want him to leave Chudinov alone. I was afraid that the whole thing, which had begun so well, might now make Chudinov really mad.

"Look, Remizkin, I advise you to stick to your main job," I said. "Why are you making such a fuss about something that is quite clear to everyone. And besides, what is there so extraordinary about the whole affair? Any trained skier would have done the same thing."

The reporter opened his eyes wide in amazement.

"No need to make a mountain out of a mole-hill," I went on. "You want to make a sensation of the thing and you're only complicating relations between people when they could be so pleasant. Want to know what Gounod, the composer of *Faust*, once said?"

"I heard the opera over the radio but don't know much about the composer," was Remizkin's ready reply.

"Well, Gounod said, 'Good deeds make no noise and noise makes no good deeds.'"

"I never expected you, Comrade Carichev, of all people, to adopt such an attitude," Remizkin said. "And you know a good story when you see one."

"What attitude?"

"You'll forgive me, but you have no feeling for the truly heroic!"

What could I answer? Fortunately after that he let me alone.

The next day I learned that Chudinov had been invited by Mayor Vorokhtin, who had just returned from a holiday and a business visit to Moscow.

The mayor was a man of such great girth and height that everything he wore appeared to be too small for him. It was as though he had grown out of his clothes. The sleeves of his dark blue jacket crinkled at his massive shoulders and were too short for his long arms. It looked as if the suit into which his powerful body had been squeezed would come apart any minute and the buttons fly in all directions. His thick neck was far too big for this striped shirt's collar. The tie, too, tightly knotted, was too small for him. The office itself and the desk were dwarfed by his immense bulk. He appeared to be lapping over the large armchair in which he was seated. It creaked under his weight and threatened to fall apart. To Chudinov the whole town of Zemogorsk seemed too tiny in size for the huge figure of its mayor.

The mayor greeted him cordially, shaking his hand heartily but gently. He clasped Chudinov by the shoulders and made him sit down in a leather-upholstered chair which he drew towards him with the toe of his boot, and dropped himself into an armchair opposite. The face that Chudinov saw before him had a white shining brow and plump pink cheeks. The mayor stared at him for a while and then suddenly winked.

"Well, I know all about you. You're a fine engineer, perhaps a little drastic in the methods you're using, but you've set things right in that office of yours pretty quick. I like that idea of yours of posting up the designs of our future buildings.

"We appreciate all you've done," he went on after a short pause, "but there's been a complaint against you. You seem to be a little too hard on our young skiers. But I suppose now that's a thing of the past since we've discovered who you really are. Can't put it over us any more. Look at that!"

He picked up from his desk the magazine Chudinov knew only too well. The cover pictured him as the 1939 ski champion.

"You're not going to back out now, are you? Our town, as you know, is famous for its skiers—it is the home of the conquerors of the snows as we like to put it. And now about Mayak—I tell you Mayak can give Raduga a 20-point handicap and beat it any time.

"But so far it is twenty-five points behind," put in Chudinov, trying hard not to smile.

"Bad luck, just bad luck," the mayor said heatedly. "Our recent defeat is due to the fact that the snow round Moscow is different from what we have over here. The wax we used, and we have our own secret recipe, passed on from generation to generation, proved unsuitable for skiing round Moscow. The judges, too, are to blame. You'll excuse me for saying so, but they were unfair to our skiers. You Muscovites are very sharp that way. I know you!"

He shook a huge finger at Chudinov and gave him another wink.

"The judges had nothing to do with it," Chudinov objected. "It's your technique. It's poor! Take, for example, that local star of yours—Natasha Skuratova. She's got all the makings of a champion. But she needs to develop better speed. Yes," he suddenly checked himself, "she's good but lacks much yet."

"You are quite right there," said the mayor. "I'm a great lover of skiing, but I'm not blind. I know our skiers lack technique. And that's where you come in, Comrade Chudinov. You can lend us a helping hand. Why, your coming here is a stroke of good luck for us." He leaned forward, placed his hands on Chudinov's knees, and lightly knocking one knee against the other, went on in a confidential tone, "A stroke of good luck, I tell you. Now listen, my friend, I just can't wait for the time when I shall be able to turn on the radio"—he stretched out his long hand and with no difficulty reached the radio set in the far

corner of the room—"and hear the sports announcer say, 'Natasha Skuratova of the Mayak Sports Association in Zemogorsk is winner of the U.S.S.R. ski championship.'

"Now I'm quite serious about all this. Why have you given up sports? If somebody has hurt your pride, forget it. Help us and you'll be the most honoured man in Zemogorsk, and Honorary Citizen, you can take my word for it. Is it settled? Will you help us with the training of our skiers?"

"Listen to our tiny tots broadcast," suddenly came from the radio which the mayor had switched on a minute ago, "which begins with a series of riddles. Good afternoon, children."

The mayor switched off the radio and looked embarrassedly at Chudinov. Both burst into laughter.

"You think the broadcast an appropriate one for the occasion. The old mayor in his dotage, eh? Well, Comrade Chudinov, I've always dreamed of getting our town recognized as the home of the greatest skiers in our land. It's something that has got under my skin."

As he said this, he flung out his arms so wide apart that his huge figure blotted out half of the room.

"I'll think it over," said Chudinov. "All the same I must tell you that I had made up my mind even before I came here to drop skiing for good. But I'm beginning to waver in my decision. I suppose Masha Bogdanova brought that magazine to you. She did? Well, if I hadn't gone out that night into the storm, things would never have taken such a turn."

Patting his broad, clean-shaven chin, the mayor winked again.

"I've heard all about that!"

"You've heard what?" Chudinov was on his guard.

"Oh nothing!" the mayor said quickly, apparently recollecting the warning he had received from Masha Bogdanova and the other skiers.

"Nothing, only that you had without a moment's hesitation gone right out into the storm. About the rest, we keep mum. We don't like to make a fuss about anything here, and as the saying goes—if you're not caught redhanded, you're no thief, and if you're not rewarded, you're no hero."

CHAPTER 10

WAKE UP, SNOW WHITE!

That very day an interesting piece of news spread through the town. Engineer Chudinov, it appeared, had walked into the Mayak Club and spent quite a bit of time there picking out a pair of skis for himself. And while he was about it, he looked sullen and dissatisfied and criticized the club's employees on the way they looked after the skis.

He even went so far as to show them how skis should be fastened to the racks. On the whole, he produced a very unfavourable impression. A captious, conceited fellow, that's what they thought he was. Cursing himself for having left his own, well-tried pair in Moscow, Chudinov finally chose a more or less decent pair of skis. That evening he went on his first ski run in Zemogorsk.

Once out in the country, among the gently folding hills with their pine-clad tops, his muscles grew heated and resilient and he felt the old vigour return to them.

Gradually he gained impetus, broadening his stride rather than increasing his pace. How pleasant it was to feel the answering swell of the skis gliding obediently with a light tingling over the crisp, powdery snow. It was only that morning that Chudinov thought he was no longer fit, that he had grown heavy, and lost that steady swift pace which had won him universal admiration. But now he felt the supreme satis-

faction which comes to the skier when the speed which he gains gets into his bones and blood, and is imparted to every movement. The open spaces in front of Chudinov seemed to retreat quickly at the rapid advance of the sharp ends of his skis. There was an icy blast, but Chudinov pressed on against it, feeling more than ever in his true element.

With a swift leap he topped a hill and paused for a while, leaning on his sticks and peering into the distance. A group of tiny skiers in little hoods came into view. With them was a tall girl gliding softly on her skis. Chudinov had expected to see them here. He had indeed come to take another look at Natasha Skuratova and even to have a talk with her. He saw her make a gesture to the children and crouch low on her skis. The children fell in line and working assiduously with their sticks skidded down the hillside. From the distance Chudinov saw how nimble and self-assured they were—born skiers, little masters of the snows. Again he thought how much they looked like the little dwarfs.

After the children had skied down the hill, Natasha, swinging herself forward at a slant, plunged down too. In a flash she described a semi-circle round her little charges and stopped dead.

Chudinov's trained eye immediately noted a number of blunders in technique, for one thing, too much stride for flat ground. But he couldn't help admiring the ease and sweep with which she had come down the sheer slope.

Crouching down a little on his skis and passing his hand across his injured knee, as was now his habit, he swung his body forward and took his first step. A moment later he was racing down the hill at the foot of which, against the background of snow, stood the dark figures of the little dwarfs around their Snowwhite.

Suddenly he saw what seemed a natural jumping-off place—a snow-drift breaking off abruptly. It was impossible to avoid it. Crouching low on his skis, he took a leap into the air, landed on the drift and glided

swiftly across it, leaving deep tracks in his wake. Under the snow was a small snag which Chudinov couldn't have possibly noticed. His right ski ran into it. He was thrown off his balance and the next instant went slithering down, falling headlong into the drift. Luckily for him the snow was soft and powdery.

Cursing himself under his breath, he scrambled to his feet. From all sides the little skiers rushed to his assistance. Natasha, a little ahead of them, was the first to reach him. But Chudinov was on his feet, brushing off the snow which had pasted up his ears, nose and eyes, and got under his collar. He must have cut a funny figure, for the children kept tittering and turning away their faces. Natasha too could hardly refrain from smiling. Chudinov glanced at them, wiped himself with his handkerchief and suddenly broke into laughter.

"A fine somersault, wasn't it?"

A sturdy, round-headed youngster, bolder than the other children, approached him.

"I bet you're a good swimmer though," he said. "You dived into the snow with your arms like that."

"Seryozha!" Natasha gave the child a severe look and turned to Chudinov. "You're not hurt, are you?"

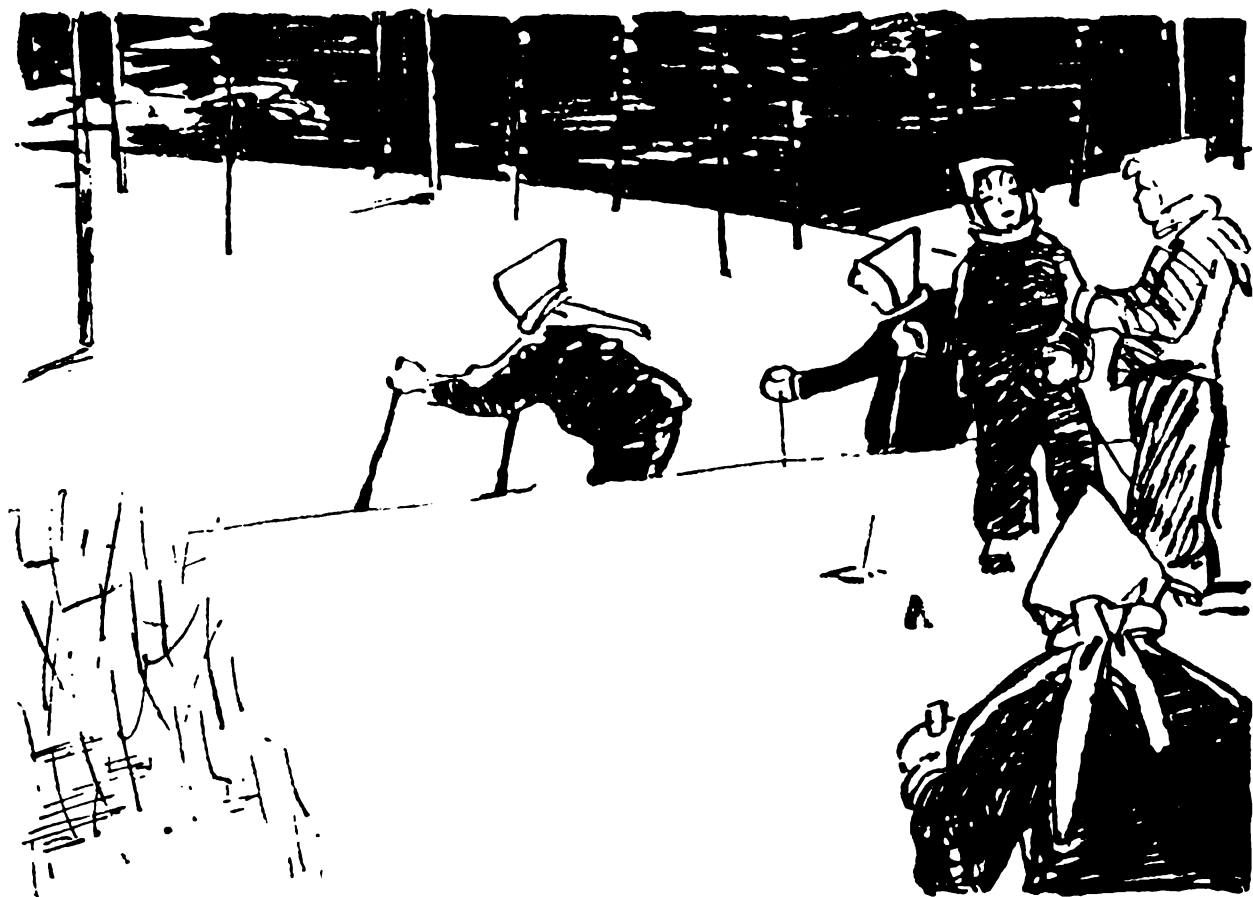
"Not at all, the snow is soft. It's that snag. Didn't see it."

Chudinov dug up the snow with his feet and there was the jagged snag that had been responsible for his disgrace.

"In our parts you have to watch out for such things," said Natasha, "I can see you're a newcomer."

"I'm from Moscow, came here a short while ago," answered Chudinov, not yet recovered from his embarrassment. He liked her deep voice and melodious Ural accent.

"I could tell that," Natasha drawled. "Used to smooth running, aren't you?"



Seryozha, his nose up in the air, was looking Chudinov up and down.

"Ask teacher to show you how to ski. Will you show him, teacher?"

"That'll do, Seryozha," said Natasha sternly. "Get back into the line." Chudinov frowned.

"It is your teacher who needs to be taught!"

"And maybe you think you're the one to teach me?" Natasha asked haughtily.

"I suppose I could teach you a thing or two, but I think I'll introduce myself first. My name is Stepan Chudinov."



Natasha cast her big grey eyes at him and blushed so deeply that even her temples, forehead and ears grew red.

"Chudinov? Then you're the engineer who. . . . They told me at the newspaper office. Only I didn't get the name quite right. I thought it was Chubinov. It was you then who tied your scarf round my neck."

"Again the old story!" Chudinov couldn't help exclaiming. "I didn't tie any scarves. I stopped wearing scarves years ago, nor am I ever going to wear them again. I never had the least intention of rescuing you. That is, I did, but I didn't have the honour really."

"I think I've heard your name before," Natasha said without taking her eyes off him. "Oh yes, there was a ski champion of that name before the war."

Chudinov looked away and bowed his head slightly.

"Yes, you are quite right," he said. "There was a champion by that name."

"But I remember hearing that he was killed or lost a leg or something. You're not a relative of his, are you? Or just his namesake?"

"Do you know what answer a host once gave to his guests when on seeing a picture of a young man in his house they asked who it was? 'This is the son of my father, but he's no brother of mine,' he said."

"Who was in the picture, I don't quite understand?" Natasha asked.

"The man himself, of course," Chudinov explained. "Well, good-bye, Natasha Skuratova. I shan't be keeping you any longer."

"How do you know my name is Natasha Skuratova?" she asked archly.

"Who doesn't know your name around here?" Chudinov replied gallantly, and, turning, glided down the hill, slightly limping on his left foot.

For some time Natasha's gaze followed Chudinov. Then as though suddenly getting the answer to some riddle she hurried after him.

"Forgive me, I didn't know it was you," she said when she had almost come shoulder to shoulder with him.

Chudinov halted, looking askew at Natasha over his shoulder.

"Nor did I know that there was such a fine skier as you in these out-of-the-way parts. Besides, I remember seeing you in Moscow."

"Oh, please don't talk about that."

"Why?" he asked with sudden heat which transformed him completely. "Nature has been kind to you, Natasha. You are a born ski cham-

pion but you have no technique to speak of. If I hadn't given up training for good, I'd make a splendid skier out of you."

"I, too, have given up ski running for good, so you needn't trouble."

"I'm not going to, my mind is made up."

"Good, so there's nothing to argue about," said Natasha.

Chudinov paused. He couldn't help admiring this girl. Stubborn, quick-tempered, with big expressive eyes—he definitely liked her.

There was about Natasha the pure fresh bloom that one so often sees in young schoolmistresses. But she did not have the too full cheeks and the too robust look that go with such bloom. She was the slender sports type. Behind her bloom were vigour and energy. Besides she was full of stamina and will-power—you could see that.

"Natasha, would you like to beat Alisa Baburina, the U.S.S.R. ski champion?" much to his own annoyance asked Chudinov.

"Beat her? I haven't a chance against her!" Natasha shook her head. "Besides, I've told you, I'm through."

Chudinov looked gravely at her. He spoke slowly but with strong conviction.

"If you really set your heart on it, Natasha, you'll beat her, and no later than next season. I'm telling you that and I never waste my breath."

He was more than ever annoyed with himself for speaking that way, but he went on, "If you're in earnest about the ski business, I'll go back on my word and train you."

"But I haven't asked you, have I?" Natasha was hurt by his overbearing attitude.

"Don't think I'm doing this for your sake."

"For whose then? Alisa Baburina's?"

Chudinov started at this remark.

"I would tell you a thing or two. But that's beside the point." He

did not wish to lose his temper. "I want to try myself as a trainer again for the last time. Perhaps I shall succeed in coaching a really fine skier, the pride of our country, a skier who could beat the girls of Norway, Finland, Austria. That's why I've started this conversation."

Natasha lowered her head. She spoke very softly, "I'm not good enough for that."

"Yes, you are! Well, it's time you stopped playing at Snowwhite and her dwarfs."

"What are you talking about? Do you know what these children mean to me?"

"You didn't quite understand me. You and the children called to my mind the story of 'Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarfs.' She left her wicked stepmother and lived with them in the hills, and was tempted by a red apple, bit off a little piece and. . ."

"And fell asleep and was put in a crystal coffin," Natasha completed the sentence for him.

"That's right and she lay there till Prince Charming came, awakened her and brought her back to life."

Natasha laughed.

"And are you Prince Charming or the wicked fairy who tempted Snowwhite to take a bite of the apple?" she asked.

"Prince Charming, of course," Chudinov replied gaily. "I'm Prince Charming and Alisa Baburina is the wicked fairy who let you taste the bitterness of defeat. Baburina, like the stepmother, is a very vain creature. And like her she's probably asking the mirror right now who's the fairest and strongest of all. And you, Natasha, have decided to go to sleep and have locked yourself up in a crystal coffin. But I say, 'Awake!' Life, whirling snow, the ski course with the little marking flags swaying in the wind—all that awaits you. And the prize is the Crystal Cup. Well, Snowwhite, Prince Charming awaits your decision."

"Why did you have to come here?" Natasha said in a hardly audible tone, averting his gaze. You're breaking my heart. Go, please!"

"I obey!" Chudinov cried triumphantly and started down the hill, then suddenly came to an abrupt halt and shouted to Natasha who was still standing on the hillock. "Bye-bye. Tomorrow we meet here at this time of the day and make a fresh start. Is that a go?"

CHAPTER 11

A FRESH START

And so they made a fresh start—Natasha and Stepan Chudinov. She had spent a sleepless night before the day of her first training lesson. The talk with Chudinov had completely upset her peace of mind—the peace of mind she thought she had regained after her retirement from the ski world. Chudinov had spoken to her so sincerely, appealed to her better nature, held out such promise to her, looking long into her eyes with a kind, level gaze that Natasha was swept off her feet. She was now ready again to test her strength as a skier—she might succeed after all. But in the wakeful hours of the morning, her self-confidence vanished and when, finally exhausted, she fell asleep it was with the firm decision that she would not keep the appointment. Yet the urge was so great that at the appointed hour she came to the hillock where they had decided to meet and found Chudinov already waiting for her. He was in his ski cap and checkered blazer with the football-shaped buttons.

"You're on time, that's good. I like people to be punctual," said Chudinov. "All the more so because we can't afford to waste a minute. And so we begin."

Two days later, on my way to town from the mines, I caught sight of Natasha and Stepan training some distance away from the main road. I jumped out of the car and, sinking knee-deep in snow, waded towards them. They looked tired and, I should say, inflamed about something. Stepan had the inevitable stop-watch in one hand and a megaphone in the other. He must have just reached the hill-top for he was standing in a cloud of churned snow.

"Try it again!" Chudinov commanded.

Getting back in place a stray lock that had stuck to her moist forehead with a toss of her head, Natasha went sweeping down the hill.

"Make your turns sharper and keep your knee forward!" Chudinov cried, snatching the megaphone and stamping his skis. Just then he caught sight of me.

"Hello, Car! No time for you right now!"

He took up the megaphone.

"Wrong ski forward. Try again!" he shouted, and turned to me.

"She knows exactly what to do, but is stubborn like a mule," he complained.

"Still I wouldn't be so short with her, Stepan. You know she's got a temper, too. They all have in the Urals. And you're no angel."

"Don't teach me. As it is I've my hands full. Look who's sitting over there keeping an eye on me." He pointed to a tree-stump.

I saw little Seryozha, huddled in his winter coat. He was sitting some distance away from the hillock. His eyes gleamed under his hood and he bounced up on the stump every time Stepan shouted at Natasha.

Up the hillock she now came and stopped short at Stepan's side.

"That was bad!" Chudinov said firmly but gently. "Bad! And your time's no good either. You haven't sufficient command of your legs. Don't slow down your pace. Now, get ready! Another go-down to the fir-tree we've marked."

Natasha did not move. She was breathing hard.

"It's no use. You're wasting your time on me."

"What d'you mean it's no use," Chudinov's anger was mounting. "If you're going to adopt such an attitude from the start it will really be no damn use."

He stole a glance at me, tilted his cap down over his forehead and continued, "Sorry, it is bad. More vigour as you go into your stride, balance the whole weight of your body on the skis. Come, give me your sticks. Now try skiing without them, like a skater."

Natasha obediently followed all his instructions.

"More pep! Relax! More swing!"

Natasha turned sharply around, came up to Chudinov and snatched her sticks out of his hands. Tears glistened on her long lashes.

"I told you we would not get along. I've skied ever since I can remember myself. My father taught me to ski, and him his father. Do you expect me to unlearn everything I've been taught, just for your dear sake?"

"Don't be stubborn!" Chudinov tried to reason with her.

"Apparently you think you have a right to treat me the way you do. But remember I never asked you to save me. . . ."

"Again that foolish talk. Phew!" Chudinov said in exasperation.

"And I've never asked you to be my trainer. You've come unwanted, uninvited. And you're one of these persons who will never meet anybody half-way. But you won't get the better of me!"

She turned sharply around and was gone.

"Again a bad turn," Chudinov shouted after her. "Make it sharper and you'll spend less time on it."

Natasha was racing off in the direction of the town.

"Natasha!" Chudinov shouted through his megaphone. "Natasha,

what do you think you're doing? Lost your temper again. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings!"

"Well, it looks like it's diamond cut diamond."

Chudinov went up to little Seryozha.

"And what good are you? You know her better than I do. Why didn't you go after her?"

Leisurely Seryozha rose from the tree-stump, stamped the snow off his feet and glanced in the direction of the vanishing girl.

"She'll never come back," he said in his husky voice. "When she gets real angry, that's the end of it!"

"Now don't you frighten me," said Chudinov, giving the youngster's nose a slight flip with his fingers. Then he snatched up the megaphone and shouted, "Natasha, get back! Stop behaving like that. Ah!" He flung the megaphone down into the snow and putting his hand on the top of Seryozha's head said, "Well, little man, what are we two going to do?"

But Seryozha was not listening to him. He was staring in astonishment at the buttons on Chudinov's blazer. Chudinov was nervously twisting round his finger the loose thread which still hung in place of the missing button. With his eyes on the buttons, Seryozha raised the flap of his coat and fumbled in his pocket. A minute later he was scooping out of his pocket and dropping into the open palm of his other hand all the usual things with which little boys' pockets are stuffed. He took out two chipped shells tied by a string, a crooked nail, a screw with a porcelain insulator, a ball-bearing, a suburban train ticket, a domino die, bits of coloured glass, a cork, a broken knife handle, a little piece of wood, a silver candy wrapper rolled into a ball and at last—a football-shaped button. A quick glance at the button in his hand and at those on Chudinov's blazer told him at once that he had made a great discovery.

"So, it's really you," the boy said, wide-mouthed with admiration.

Chudinov, who was watching Natasha disappear from view, replied absently.

"Of course, it's me, and who should it be?"

"You're the one who brought teacher and myself to the little hut on the night of the storm?"

He stretched out the hand with the missing button. But instantly his open hand closed round the button and he withdrew it behind his back.

"Give me that button at once. Where did you get it?"

"You own up to what you did and I'll give it back to you."

"I've nothing to own up to. But that's my button and I must have it back. Look how untidy I look with a missing button. Yevgeny," he turned to me, "you have a way with little boys. Get him to give me back that button."

I could hardly refrain from laughing at Stepan. He looked so forlorn and helpless.

"It's your button, why should I bother about it?" I said.

"I've guessed everything," Seryozha went on happily. "I held on to you and when I let go I tore off the button. So it's you all right. Well, I'm glad you got us out of the storm and we didn't freeze to death."

"Pure imagination, boy. Give me back that button!"

"You own up and I'll give it to you," Seryozha repeated stubbornly.

Before Chudinov could take another step forward the boy went hurtling down the hill on his skis.

"Everything's going wrong," said Chudinov, looking quite distressed. "The little fellow will go around showing that button and a whole fuss will be made about it. And the young lady has lost her temper. I wish you'd all go to the devil. I'm going to wash my hands off the whole thing! You heard what she said about my having no claims on her. It

makes me sick. Suppose you have a talk with her, Yevgeny," he said in a different tone. "You know how to handle women better than I do."

I was going to have a little talk, not with Natasha but with her obstinate pupil. Things were taking an unpleasant turn and, I thought, might cause a rift between Natasha and Stepan.

The next morning I went to the boarding-school and found the children playing in the garden. They were digging a tunnel in the snow. Little Seryozha, standing apart from the others with Katya, was engaged in a little game of his own. He was shouting something into a trumpet rolled from a newspaper while Katya skied up and down in front of him.

"Match your arm and leg movements," shouted Seryozha.

"That's what I'm doing," came Katya's ringing voice. Then changing her tone of voice she asked softly, "Wait a minute, stop the game and tell me what you mean by 'matching movements.'" Then again in a loud haughty voice: "If you are going to insist on my doing things your way, I shall stop training. Trying to teach me when you yourself fell nose downwards into the snow."

"When was that?" asked the indignant Seryozha.

"Not you but he—remember the way he tumbled into the snow?" And they resumed the game. "Nobody asked you to be my trainer."

"You've a bad temper."

"So have you, worse than mine. As to your having saved us—that remains to be proved."

"I'll prove it," said Seryozha digging his hand into his pocket.



I thought this an opportune moment to interrupt their game.

"Hello, little man," I said going up close to the garden fence.
"Come over here!"

"Hello, I know you, you're a newspaper editor from Moscow."

"You're not far from wrong, I will be one some day. Come over here!" I put my arm around him as he appeared at the garden gate and took him out into the street. "Don't you think you're making too much of a fuss about a button. Why don't you give it back to its rightful owner? He'll cry if you don't give it to him."

"Why doesn't he own up that he's saved us?" Seryozha pouted and wriggled out of my hold.

"That's a different question. What's your name?"

"Seryozha!"



"Well, Seryozha, let's have a man-to-man talk, what do you say?"

"You mean like two comrades talk."

"Exactly."

I slipped my arm through his and we began strolling up and down the street by the garden fence, Seryozha feeling proud and grown-up, I suppose.

"See, chum, we don't want a fuss. It would only make things worse. Your teacher will get

angry. Everything is going well now, you teacher is being trained by Chudinov and now you have to come bothering with that button. Your teacher may think that Chudinov expects her to be grateful, to show that she is indebted to him. And she may not like that. She's a woman, after all, and all women are like that, aren't they?" Was I much better at tackling little boys than Stepan, I wondered. And that bullet-headed little devil did nothing to make the conversation run smooth keeping either silent or answering in monosyllables.

"All women are like that, aren't they?" I repeated.

"Suppose so," Seryozha said at last.

"That's a smart boy!"

Encouraged by the praise, Seryozha decided to pursue the subject. "Teacher may even want to marry Chudinov and go away with him."

I coughed.

"Look here, Seryozha, what you said before was quite smart but now you're talking nonsense. I'm going back to Moscow in a day or two and I want to make sure that you won't talk to anybody about your teacher and Chudinov. Let the two of them go on training in peace, so that next year your teacher will beat everybody in the race. When she does, I don't care to whom you show the button. I hope, you've not mentioned anything about it to your teacher... you haven't? Good! She would have taken it away from you if you had. I beg you to have a little more patience and keep it all a secret."

Seryozha was deep in thought.

"If I keep it a secret will you take me next year along with teacher to the ski races?"

"Looking ahead, eh? All right, I will."

"You'll get me a ticket, too?"

"Of course!" I assured him.

On the outskirts of Zemogorsk, through the snow-clad pines one could see the tall buildings of the concentration mill and the steel girders of the scaffold bridge over which the ore was transported. Here Chudinov was busy training a group of girls of the Mayak Sports Association. He knew it wouldn't be fair on his part to give all his attention to Natasha and neglect the others. So he had agreed to take on a group. As to Natasha, she never showed up after their quarrel. Chudinov's spirits sank, yet he would not make the first step towards a reconciliation. Masha Bogdanova, on the other hand, gave Chudinov cause to be proud of her from the very first lesson. Among the other girls, too, there were some very gifted skiers.

"Hello, Comrade Chudinov," said Uncle Fedya who had come to watch the training. "How are things going? The mayor called up, wanted to know about the training. I told him everything was all right except that Natasha has again walked out on us. He said that if you agree he would talk to her."

"Not necessary," said Chudinov apprehensively, and added with a smile, "we'll manage somehow without the interference of the authorities. She'll come round after a while. She's not stupid and knows what's good for her."

"How about the rest? I hope they haven't got Natasha's temper."

"Pretty good. I shan't say too much, but I think in a year's time the girls will give a fine performance at the Annual Ski Tournament. They may even put other ski-runners in the shade. You can see for yourself, if you wish. Come, girls, try that straight run again. More push, Masha, and greater speed as you go downhill! Now step on it! Tired? More grit! We'll beat both Natasha and Alisa Baburina, I tell you."

Little Masha Bogdanova tossed back her frost-covered curls.

"Not Natasha. She's a born ski champion."

"So she is!" Chudinov agreed grimly. "Don't I know it! Her qualities as a skier are splendid, but her disposition is not. But what's the use of talking. I wish you, Masha, as her bosom friend, would try to influence her."

"No use trying. Stubborn like anything. It runs in the family."

"Never mind, we'll make her see reason."

Masha sighed.

"I know I'll never win any ski championship," she said.

"Don't be so sure about it. You are doing marvellously well."

"Please don't try being kind to me," Masha interrupted. "But for the life of me I wouldn't give up skiing."

She took a leap forward and her rather short legs began painstakingly going over all the movements taught to her by Chudinov. Swiftly she glided down the ski route, the frosted tendrils of her hair above her little pink ears fluttered by the wind.

On the day before my departure from Zemogorsk, I finished all my business rather early and returned to the hotel before dusk. Chudinov was lying on his bed, his face turned to the wall. Twilight was descending quickly, as it does in winter in these parts, but Chudinov had not bothered to turn on the light.

"Sulking, my friend?" I asked, sitting down on my bed. "I hope your building work is going well. As far as I know, everybody's praising you. Well, what's wrong, old man, out with it. Remember, I'm a newspaperman, there are channels I can tap which are closed to you."

Chudinov raised himself for a moment, wrinkled his nose as he looked at me, as though I were vinegar, and poked his head back into the pillow.

"The press can't help me. You're the one who is to blame for everything. It was you who made me choose Zemogorsk, knowing perfectly well the fine skiers it had, and it was you who replaced the mythical Zinaida Avdoshina by the real Natasha Skuratova. Now confess that it was you too who told her that it was I who had saved her and the boy on the night of the blizzard."

"Honest, I had no hand in that. You go about saving people, make a secret of it and expect them to be as good-natured about it as I've been. All right, not another word!" I hastened to add, for Stepan was already brandishing a clenched fist at me.

"'Not another word'—I've heard that before," he growled into the pillow. "As to Natasha, she's turned up her nose at everything, and she's smashing all my training plans. Whatever made me take up ski training again after I had definitely decided to quit."

"You're taking the whole thing too much to heart, Stepan," I said. "By the way, you haven't fallen in love with Natasha, have you?"

"What! A new discovery on your part. Stop-press news report by our special correspondent." Stepan sat up abruptly on the bed. "You know my principle, old boy—when on snow, be cold as snow!"

"Gentlemen of the jury, don't believe him, I tell you the ice has been broken. I can see your heart melting, Stepan."

Chudinov pounced on me and, snatching me by the lapels of my coat, shook me violently.

"What are you so mad about?" I asked. "The girl is worth two of you!" Chudinov slowly released his hold. "She's got sterling qualities one rarely comes across."

I sighed involuntarily. Chudinov, too, heaved a deep sigh, but at once turned it into an imitation cough.

"Well, we've both sighed at the same time which means that we see eye to eye on the matter," I said. "Still things are not going smoothly for you. But I have confidence in your good sense."

"Suppose you try to talk to her before you leave, Yevgeny," Chudinov said with some hesitation. "Tell her . . . well, tell her a great skier'll be lost to the world if she doesn't go on with the training. Oh, do I have to teach you to make speeches?"

"To plead another's cause—that must be one of my missions in life," I couldn't refrain from saying. "Apparently I was cut out for a Cyrano de Bergerac. Possessing none of the graces of my sex, I am chosen as an emissary for my dashing handsome cavalier friends and help them to win the hearts of their lady-loves."

Chudinov jumped over from his bed to mine, dropped down beside me and putting his arm round my shoulders gave me a hug.

"You'll do it, old man, won't you? You journalists possess the gift of gab and you can handle a delicate situation."

I was touched by his words and my conscience bothered me.

"Stepan, we've known each other for years and years," I began, determined to make a clean breast of it, "and I'll not hide from you any longer that I did have a hand in getting you out to this place. Judge me as you please, but that's the truth. I'll try to help you now too. But don't expect me to talk to her. One quick-tempered friend is more than enough for me. But we could place an article in the local paper that might make Natasha change her mind. I'll get Donat Remizkin to do it. We could write of such questions as healthy attitude to training, and arrogance and inability to face difficulties in the right spirit on the part of a certain comrade, what do you say?"

"I say it's no good," said Chudinov. "There is enough talk going on as it is. There is, for example, that kid going about with that button

of mine and insisting that he had torn it off my blazer on the night of the storm."

"Oh, I forgot about that," I interrupted him. "Promise that you will not discuss this subject with Natasha or the boy, that you will neither deny nor admit anything, will you?"

"Certainly!"

"Here's your button!" I stretched out a hand with the gleaming football-shaped button in it. "Here, sew it on. You've found your button, Stepan, but I still have the suspicion that you've lost your heart."

"So, you got it from the little chap after all?" Chudinov asked amazed.

"He gave it to me himself. A smart boy!"

CHAPTER 12

THE NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Before I left Zemogorsk I had a long talk with Remizkin, arranged everything with him, and he carried out my little plan faithfully.

Three days later when Chudinov walked into his office he found everyone eyeing him in a strange manner.

Masha Bogdanova was the first to speak.

"You've been very hard on Natasha. No doubt she deserves it in some ways, but to take her to pieces like that..."

"What are you talking about?" Chudinov, amazed, had the worst sort of presentiment.

"About the interview you gave the paper!"

Chudinov's eye fell on the fresh copy of the *Zemogorsk Worker*

lying on his desk. One of the articles was heavily pencilled off. He settled down to read it with every appearance of calm.

“‘Natasha Skuratova who in the past had time and again won the town ski championship [ran the article], though a skilled skier, stands little chance of winning it this season,’ declared Engineer S. M. Chudinov, Merited Master of Sports and Mayak coach, in an interview with your correspondent. ‘Natasha Skuratova maintains a supercilious attitude towards the new alternating two-step technique adopted by leading skiers the world over and does not polish up her style, preferring her antiquated methods to. . . .’”

Chudinov mopped his forehead. Yevgeny must have arranged for this to appear in print. A fine thing! Try and approach her now.

Soon the whole town was discussing the interview. In Drizhik's barbershop nobody seemed to talk of anything else. Opinions differed greatly. Some sided with Chudinov, feeling the need for drastic measures after Zemogorsk skiers had fared so badly at the contest in Moscow. Others resented the tone of the interview and thought Chudinov an overbearing and captious fellow.

Natasha's father was hurt to the quick. The newspaper with the interview had been posted on the fence near the pit entrance. He walked past, for he couldn't very well read it carefully with all eyes on him. He even feigned complete indifference to the whole matter. But no sooner did he reach home than he made Savely read the paper aloud to him.

It was stuffy and hot in the dining-room. A steaming samovar, puffing like a locomotive, stood on the table. Savely put great emphasis on every word. His father, growing more and more indignant, kept interrupting him.

“‘Natasha Skuratova who in the past. . . .’”

"‘In the past,’" mimicked the old man. "That means at present she's not worth anything."

"‘...had time and again won the town ski championship... stands little chance....’"

"‘Little chance,’ I like that!"

"‘Natasha Skuratova maintains a supercilious attitude to the new alternating two-step technique adopted by leading skiers the world over and does not polish up her style, preferring her antiquated methods....’"

"Wait a minute!" cried his father. "Who's the fellow who wants to teach her new methods?"

"That's the engineer chap from Moscow. He's in charge of the designers."

"Well, he'll think different when he gets a good taste of our hills and blasts. That's not the country round Moscow for him with the snow only ankle-deep. I'll go down to the newspaper office tomorrow. I want to have it out with that smart aleck. Don't think you can stop me, Mother."

There was a knock at the door.

"Now who can that be? Come in!"

The slightly frozen door gave way with a squeak and let in a tall stranger heavily flaked with snow.

"May I come in?" he asked, taking his fur cap off and bowing stiffly. "Good evening!"

Grudgingly, old Skuratov acknowledged the greeting.

"My name's Chudinov. I'm an engineer from the construction office," the visitor introduced himself.

Natasha's father rose and stretched himself to his full height.

Chudinov who had heard a good deal about the Skuratovs and their austerity somehow expected to find the head of the family as huge a



man as the mayor. He had started out on the visit with misgivings, fearing a stern, uncivil reception. Seated at the table Skuratov appeared to Chudinov to be a big man. But when he rose and Chudinov saw how short he was, he somehow felt greatly relieved. Though well-knit, the old man was extremely squat, his broad shoulders oddly out of proportion with his short rather skimpy legs thrust into felt boots.

Skuratov peered searchingly into the visitor's face, passed two fingers over his close-clipped moustache and coughed.

"You're the fellow who gave that interview about Natasha to the newspaper?"



"It was this way..." Chudinov began to explain but instead cursed himself for having come at all.

"You can't write things like that without thinking them out beforehand," Natasha's father said angrily. "I tell you what we people don't know about skiing is not worth knowing. Don't flutter your hands at me, Mother, I'm no mosquito. Don't teach me manners. I know how to behave myself." Then turning to Chudinov again, he said, "All right, take your coat off, young man, you might as well sit down. Save-ly, hand me my jacket!"

From behind a partition his son handed Skuratov his jacket. On

its lapel were two decorations: the Order of the Militant Red Banner, time-worn and without clasps, a reminder of partisan exploits during the Civil War days, and the Order of the Red Banner of Labour, a sparkling new order with a ribbon.

"I've come to have a talk with you," said Chudinov.

"Why hadn't you come a few days before? It's too late now—the harm's done. All the same make yourself comfortable. Pour him a cup of tea, Mother. It's tea first and talk after. That's the custom."

For a time all sat silently sipping very hot tea. Natasha's father drank his slowly from the saucer, wheezing a little and blowing under his moustache as though to prevent it from getting wet.

No sooner had Chudinov finished his tea than his cup was refilled—once and then again. He tried to protest, but no one heeded him. When he put down his empty cup and hastened to begin the conversation which had brought him to the Skuratovs—presto! the cup was again full of steaming tea. Finally, puffing, he resolutely pushed away the empty cup with both hands.

"Won't you have another cup?" asked Skuratov.

"No, thanks, I've had four already."

"We never count the cups we drink," said the old man dryly. "Pour him another cup, Mother."

He moved across to Chudinov a fresh cup of steaming tea filled to the very brim.

"And another for me, and I hope that won't be my last."

A few more minutes passed with the company silently sipping the hot tea from the saucers. Chudinov, now quite out of breath, hastily put aside his empty cup as he had done before. Natasha's father caught it up and passed it to his wife.

On seeing this, Chudinov began to shake his head violently. He was by now quite exasperated by this tea-drinking business. He wanted to implore his host to put a stop to it. But the old man looked away.

"Man, you're damaging Moscow's reputation as a great tea-drinking city. Why, in the old days when a Muscovite visited us he would empty a whole samovar in no time and ask us for another. You've got to drink down that cup just to keep up Moscow's prestige. Yes, but to get back to what we were talking about, Comrade. . . ."

"Chudinov," Savely prompted.

"You, Comrade Chudinov, have been too hasty. True, Natasha's got a temper. Takes after her mother."

He stole a glance from under his bushy eyebrows at his small wife, who sat demurely sipping her tea. She waved his words away with the exclamation, "Her mother indeed!"

"Let me cite an example in my own justification," said Chudinov. "Ore has brought fame to your little town, hasn't it? But to make that ore really useful for industry it had to be concentrated, filtered and separated from the waste matter. And so it was only after a concentration mill was built here that your Zemogorsk ore became so very valuable."

"You're quite right," Skuratov agreed readily. "But what are you driving at?"

"What I'm driving at is that there are many talented sportsmen in your town. But what these gifted people need is good training to bring fame to your town."

Natasha's father twitched his moustache.

"You talk well but I'd like to see if you're just as smart on skis as you are with your tongue."

"I'll show you gladly what I can do," said Chudinov. I've been trying to teach Natasha what I know, but she's stubborn. She could become a world-famous skier if she only learned to control her temper."

"What do we want her to be famous for?" the old man asked. "Look at the fellow who got her and the child out of the storm, he doesn't care to be famous. And that's what we like."

Chudinov frowned. He began drumming with his fingers on the table and cleared his throat.

"I'm talking about something quite different," he said. "Natasha's becoming famous would mean winning fame for Soviet sports. And sports is something our people take great pride in. That is why on the whole I think the paper was quite right in publishing that interview with me. It was done in the interests of sports."

Again Skuratov twitched his moustache.

"Trying to put one over me? Well, you're a clever fellow, I'll own to that. But we too can be clever in some ways. Take our waxes. The recipes are passed from generation to generation and kept secret. But if we get to know each other closer, I'll let you have the wax I prepare myself. Well let's go, I want to see if you're as good as you sound."

His wife waved her arms in consternation.

"Where are you off to at this late hour? What about more tea? At your age you've no business to race with a young man like that," she nodded in Chudinov's direction. "Your stubbornness will be the death of you! Have you forgotten what the doctor said about your heart?"

Skuratov was putting on his fur cap.

"Never mind the doctor and stop your nagging." He poked Chudinov with his elbow. "See how she gets worked up! Natasha takes after her. Savely, get my skis. They're in the hall, and fetch the wax too. We need it."

The interview published in the local paper had greatly upset Natasha. She even cried a little in her room when she read it. Her first reaction was one of resentment and anger. When that subsided, she began thinking things over.

What if Stepan Chudinov was right after all? Perhaps she really had been too quick to take offence when things went wrong. But his manner and tone—how could she get accustomed to them? His words were harsh and hurt. But didn't he use these words because he sincerely and eagerly wished her to get on? And didn't she really want to do exactly what he demanded of her?

Natasha was beginning to feel the strange power of Stepan Chudinov's personality. She had never known anyone quite like him. Yet over and over again she tried to convince herself that he had been unforgivably rude. But the more she thought of it, the readier she was to forgive him. This made her feel terribly annoyed with herself.

That day, after returning from the daily stroll with the children, Natasha was just about to close the front door behind her when she heard someone call her. She looked out into the street and saw Masha Bogdanova ski up gracefully to the porch.

"Watch me do some turns, Natasha," she cried. She did several dashing circles right before Natasha who watched her from the porch. Then she swept down the road, turned it in a whirl of snow and whisked past Natasha in a new, easy style.

"How do you like that, Natasha?" Masha shouted. "Good, isn't it? Do you know why? Because the arm and leg movements are well coordinated, you get into swing and your stride is long and easy, that way."

She blurted it all out in one breath like a lesson learned by rote. She was a good pupil, you could see that.

Natasha watched her with a twinge of jealousy.

"So, you've adopted the new technique," she said.

"Why shouldn't I if it's good?" Masha flung at her on the run, turned, skied over to Natasha and put her hand on her friend's shoulder. "If only we had skied that way in Moscow. Natasha, what a little fool you are. What's got into you? You have no idea how *nice* he is!"

"Oh, I see," Natasha drawled. "No wonder you're trying so hard."

"Don't be silly," Masha said indignantly. "It's quite clear who he's stuck on. It wasn't me he went out to save on that stormy night."

"How do you know it was he? Even Remizkin has his doubts about it. And if it was he, why is he making a secret of it? I suppose he's waiting for me to fall on my knees and thank him. Well, if he prefers keeping us in the dark he'll have to wait a long time before I do that."

"He's not keeping me in the dark. I can see a good deal, Natasha!"

"You're trying to see something that doesn't exist!" Natasha said, blushing. "I see that he praises you in the newspaper and even sets you up as an example to me. Good-bye!"

With anger welling in her, she quickly ran up the porch steps.

"Shall I tell Chudinov you're willing to make a fresh start?" Masha shouted after her. "Don't pretend you didn't hear me. I can see you blushing!"

Natasha banged shut the door.

Meanwhile, Chudinov was giving an exhibition of his skiing skill to Skuratov and his son.

He swept down a steep slope at a killing pace and made a breathtaking standing turn. Natasha's father and brother could not keep up

with him. Both were perspiring, the hair wet under their fur caps. The old man was gasping.

"My, you're fast," he cried. "Savely, you're nowhere near him. You need experience, boy. Well, well, the way you got past me, as though I was standing still and not moving at all. What's that new style of yours? How do you manage that killing speed? Well, I've got to hand it to you, you're good. You've taken all the wind out of me. I'll grant Natasha is a fool not to learn from you. I'll have a talk with her myself."

Returning from her talk with Natasha, Masha Bogdanova ran into Chudinov.

"Hello." She shot a glance in the direction of the boarding-school. "I see this part of the town has not lost its attraction for you."

Chudinov bowed and continued on his way with great big strides, making no reply and looking very determined. Masha veered round, followed him and was soon at his side.

"I'm certain Natasha wants to resume training with you. She'd come tomorrow, only she's shy and expects you to coax her a little."

"How do you know?" Chudinov asked, pausing. "Did she tell you?"

"D'you think Natasha would say a thing like that outright? But I can see through her. She would come, only she's really shy, particularly after that interview. I told her, 'What are you shy about? Chudinov is no fool. He'll understand how you feel.'" With a glance around, she rose on her tiptoes as high as the ski bindings permitted and whispered into Chudinov's ear, "Can you keep a secret? She's suffering because of you."

"Oh, so the interview's had its effect!"

Masha cast him a look full of pity—so, he's too obtuse to grasp her meaning?

"You don't understand, she's pining away for you."

"You're imagining things. After that interview I'm sure she doesn't even want to hear of me."

"Shame on you. Here's a girl like Natasha breaking her heart and you. . . . Don't you think Natasha has a temper. She only pretends she has. In reality she's got the sweetest of dispositions."

"She's wonderful!" Chudinov agreed readily. "But she's more than that—she has all the makings of a world ski champion. Yes, a wonderful girl. . . ." he repeated pensively.

"I'm glad you see that at least," Masha said somewhat relieved. "I was really sorry to see you two quarrelling when you should. . . ."

CHAPTER 13

"BOLERO" AND "SIX-STEP"

As he approached the boarding-school, Chudinov paused to listen. From the top windows came the muffled sound of children's voices, singing somewhat out of tune, and the faint strains of a piano. Chudinov knew that this was the hour of Natasha's singing lesson with the children. Gently he pulled the bell cord. The door was opened by Taisya Valeryanovna, the school superintendent. She was evidently on her way out, for she had her overcoat and shawl on. In the hallway Chudinov explained to her that he had come for a minute's talk with Natasha.

"You'll find her in the music room upstairs."

Treading lightly, Chudinov mounted the stairs. He paused in the doorway and remained there unnoticed. Straining their thin voices, the children were singing:

*Not a single door squeaks,
Behind the hearth the mousie sleeps.
D'ye hear a moaning beyond the wall?
Dearie, it's not our affair at all!*

Seryozha's husky little bass suddenly rose above the others on a jarring note. Natasha stopped playing.

"Seryozha! Seryozha, have you no ear for music?" She struck the right key with her finger to help him. "Do you hear that? 'Dearie, it's not our affair at all. . . .' That's the way to sing it!"

Katya, her little nose up in the air, put in sententiously, "Seryozha's got ears, all right, teacher, but what you tell him goes in one and comes out of the other. Taisya Valeryanovna said so."

"You stop telling on people," Natasha cut her short. "Come, children, once again."

She turned to the piano, played the opening notes and then struck up the tune together with the children.

Natasha sang in a deep resonant voice, leading the chorus with the ease that a wind-driven sail carries a boat. And now Katya took a false note.

"And where is your ear?" asked Natasha.

"My voice's fallen out with my ears," Katya rumbled off defensively.

"Now *you* listen," Natasha began playing the melody without the accompaniment.



“Not quite that way,” came Chudinov’s voice from the doorway. “May I help?”

Chudinov was the last person Natasha expected to see at that moment. She tossed back her head somewhat haughtily but said nothing.

Not in the least disconcerted, Chudinov made his way towards the children.

“Hello!” he greeted them, feigning cheerfulness. “May I show you how to play that piece, Natasha? I know the song well and I’m rather fond of the melody.”

“You’ve come to teach me here, too?” Natasha whispered.

Chudinov, who had an aversion for speaking in undertones, replied loudly, “That’s not in my line. But let’s try playing it together.”

He drew a chair to the piano and without the least difficulty moved Natasha together with the piano stool to make room for himself. This done, he seated himself on her left.

"Let's begin!"

Natasha struck up the melody. Chudinov joined in with great spirit, taking the lead. He winked at the children who took up the tune, gazing happily at the pair at the piano and following the movements of Chudinov's head with which he conducted the chorus.

"Good!" he kept saying. "'Behind the hearth the mousie sleeps. . . .' More pep! That's better! Now you've got it." He struck a chord with such force that it caused a strange quivering inside the piano.

"Phew! The piano's coming apart," said Seryozha beside himself with delight. "Hear that?"

Chudinov rose, took a look behind the raised lid of the piano and began wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"A string's snapped," he said. "Really nothing. I'll fetch a tuner tomorrow, he'll mend it. As to the song, the melody is not bad but the words—'D'ye hear a moaning behind the wall? Dearie, it's not our affair at all!' It means don't give a hang for others so long as you're happy yourself. Not educational!"

"Must I teach the children songs only about front-rank workers? Can't a jingle do once in a while?" asked Natasha.

Chudinov paused for want of an answer, then said, "Never mind that, I want a word with you, Natasha. Come out into the hall for a minute, will you?"

"Please teacher," Katya cried after them. "You promised to finish reading that story about Snowwhite and the little dwarfs."

Katya could not understand why her teacher turned red as though she had been caught misbehaving and why Chudinov's eyes flashed triumphantly under his heavy brows.

"What is it you want to tell me?" Natasha asked as she reluctantly went out into the hall with Chudinov.

"What I've already told you a number of times, that you have a most unpleasant disposition, but you have the qualities. . . ."

Natasha interrupted him.

"I've read all about that in the newspaper, so you needn't repeat it," she said calmly. "You're making too much of a fuss. We don't like it here."

She stole a glance at Chudinov. To hide his embarrassment he brought up his handkerchief to his face. In its corner she saw the initials "S. C."

"To be frank, I can't make you out at all," she said, her self-assurance slipping away from her. "You seem one person one day and another the next."

"Suppose you stopped picking quarrels with me, Natasha," said Stepan gravely. "Shake hands."

He stretched out his broad, strong hand.

"I guess there's no getting away from you," Natasha was softening.

"Let's stop arguing. See, I came first, so that you won't come last on the ski track. Came on my own. Give up, eh?"

"All right, you win," said Natasha.

They now met daily. Chudinov knew no fatigue and gradually infected Natasha with his energy. There would be endless practising and going over of the same movements. And then Chudinov would take out his stop-watch and time Natasha. How she detested the fast little second hand which always managed to get the better of her: when she reached the two little fir-trees, marked to be the finishing line, the second hand always managed to be ahead of her.

"I'm all fagged out," Natasha complained after a lesson as she dropped down on a tree-stump. She undid the bindings around her tired feet and stood her skis up in the snow. "Say something," she begged.

"Listen, Natasha! When you approach the finish make one great last rush. Don't spare your strength. That last stretch requires all the grit you've got—and temper. You have to get really angry at the end of the run if you want to get the better of your rival. Forgive me, but my hands are just itching to take you by the scruff of your neck and give you a good shake-up. I'll be damned if I don't do it next time."

"There you go swearing again," Natasha said wearily.

Chudinov felt a little embarrassed, but his anger did not subside.

"I damned myself, not you!"

"Much obliged to you for that!"

"Damn us both!" he replied with sudden fury. "You're ready to flare up at me for the least thing but there where your Ural temper would really stand you in good stead you don't show it. You'll never make a great skier unless you can get good and angry." Then looking quite innocent, he added, "When I coached Alisa Baburina. . . ."

Natasha jumped to her feet.

"I'm sick and tired of hearing Alisa Baburina's name. . . . All right, let's go on!"

"We'll call it a day," Chudinov said slyly.

"Oh, no, we won't. I want to go on, d'you hear?"

And so they trained day after day.

One evening after their training hours Chudinov pulled two concert tickets out of his pocket.

"Are you free tonight, Natasha? I've got these tickets for a symphony concert. Chaikovsky's 'Fifth' and Ravel's 'Bolero.' That last is a powerful piece. It'll do you good to hear it."

They sat in the large hall of the Miners' Club, listening to an orches-

tra from Sverdllovsk play "Bolero." Natasha who had never heard the piece before was entranced by it. Strictly speaking, there was hardly any music in the opening bars. The musicians sat motionless upon the stage. The conductor, too, seemed not to stir—there was but a slight steady vibration of the baton held at a level with his waist. Then somewhere from the heart of the orchestra came a dull monotonous throbbing in a slightly changing rhythm of alternate beats. Gradually, as though advancing on the audience, the steadily reverberating sound grew louder, more distinct and forceful—still in the same rhythm. The other instruments, one by one, responded. And the rhythm was soon clothed in a timorous melody, flitting from flute to violin, from violin to 'cello, and from 'cello to bassoon, like the flame with which one candle after another is lighted on a Christmas tree. With imperious sweep the rhythm gathered momentum until it set astir and held in sway all the forces of the orchestra, and the obedient melody grew fuller in tone and shade. It was played by all the instruments and what but a short while ago had been the faint throbbing of the drum had now all the scintillating, feverish appeal of a broad theme. It swept from one group of instruments to another, swelling, unfolding with a great might. The rhythm grew more rapid, the tune more repetitious. The melody continued to swell in volume—it seemed that it would at any moment break away from the orchestra, leaving the musicians too exhausted to follow it in all its profuseness, in its great demands on all the instruments to be played this way and that way, and then anew and then again quite differently. And when it seemed to be hovering over the audience, reaching into every heart, there was a sudden brief catch in the music and the avalanche of sounds which had come pouring from the instruments ceased abruptly.

For a long time after the audience burst into applause Natasha sat spellbound by the fascinating rhythm and sweeping melody.

"The 'Bolero,' " Chudinov explained softly, "is a fanatical dance with a magic rhythm. Will you laugh at me if I tell you the rhythm makes me think of skiing? Have you noticed the measure that was repeated and then the gradual gathering of momentum and all the forces brought into play for the finale—a complete give-all, a last leap with every bit of strength thrown into it. I love that piece."

It was followed by Chaikovsky's "Fifth Symphony." Natasha had always been fond of music, and now she felt greatly affected by it. It awakened vague yearnings in her. The whole world around her seemed to sing—sing with the new hope that glowed in her. She thought of tomorrow—when he and she would meet again on the snow. She thought of the man sitting at her side, only a short while ago a stranger, but now somebody her heart cried out for. He was strong, perhaps a little hard, but at bottom kind and good. Chudinov, too, let himself be carried away by the music, rocking rhythmically in his seat. Deeply moved by the piece, Natasha had unconsciously clasped his arm and pressed it with both her hands. Chudinov started, and moved away a little.

"This music is a call to victory," he said. "Do you hear it? It is a hymn to man's triumph and performance. Victory is near—for you!"

"To me the music conveys something different." She hesitated a moment and then continued, "An evening with the snow lightly blown by the wind and two people walking side by side and looking forward to a happy future."

Chudinov's heart missed a beat. Yet he replied jestingly, "H'm, side by side? That's no good. Remember you must be in the lead!"

"But to be in the lead," Chudinov was saying the next day, "you must strain every nerve and muscle."

Day followed day, and month followed month. Natasha was hard at her training. The powdery snow underfoot changed to a frozen crisp crust. Then the crust melted, leaving dark puddles of water in the ski tracks.

All trace of snow was gone. Yet Natasha's training did not stop. Together with Chudinov she set out along the rain-washed roads. Shod in running shoes, they raced among the bare trees and later round the sunny gravel track of the stadium. They went rowing, their feet resting against the log bottoms of boats and in hands accustomed to ski sticks they held long heavy oars which gleamed in the rays of the sun as they sculled down the lake.

When the children of the boarding-school moved with Natasha to a summer camp, Chudinov went there every other evening, travelling by train. Natasha's training took the form of long runs, hikes and other strenuous exercises. The children, who had by then grown quite accustomed to Chudinov, were always delighted to see him, even if he did take their teacher away from them for a few hours. Whenever he had a chance Chudinov played ball with them, invented new exciting games about pathfinders and hunters, made bats and other interesting things.

Cold Siberian gales were soon blowing again, stripping the birches bare of their russet and amber leaves and the maples of their scalloped ones which looked as though cut out of morocco. Chudinov taught Natasha to ski on the dank golden carpet of foliage, assuring her that it made a fine smooth ski course. Natasha could hardly recognize her home town after the summer months during which she had been away. Much of the town's construction work had been completed.

What Natasha remembered seeing in the blueprints which Chudinov would show to her from time to time, had passed from paper to streets. The designs had come to life as stately wooden and stone dwellings; as newly laid streets stretching to the woods; as an imposing square of

which there had been no sign in the spring. Natasha was happy in the knowledge that Chudinov was responsible for her town's growth, just as he was responsible for her own growth. And to her as well as to the city he held out great promise.

She felt more and more drawn to Chudinov. His blunt and direct way of speaking and thinking, his genial sincerity were dear to her—and above all his strength of character. Natasha who had grown up among strong people, such as were the miners and hunters of those parts, set great store by strength, physical and mental. Her father was still a very strong man, able to lift two dumb-bells each weighing no less than 35 or 40 pounds and cross himself three times with them. Years back, despite his short stature, he had been famous for his strength. But Chudinov's main strength lay in his will, his determination to reach the goal he had set himself and that goal was her goal.

Chudinov was a marvellous person. But why, Natasha thought, should he have no eyes for anything else except the purpose ahead of him?



The winter set in early, sheathing the town streets in snow and filling the woods round it with figures of skiers gliding in and out among the trees.

One evening, when Chudinov was working on his designs in his hotel room, Donat Remizkin rushed in with hardly a knock on the door. Chudinov was used to Remizkin's intrusions, expecting on such occasions to hear from the flustered reporter some sensational bit of news.

"You've got to do a dance if you want me to show you this." He waved above his head a paper just off the press. "I've come here straight from the printshop. Come, do a dance."

But just then his eye fell on Chudinov's left leg wrapped in a plaid and stretched out on a chair. Chudinov's knee joint had been bothering him since the beginning of the autumn.

"All right, I'll do the dance for you. 'The Six-Step!' Watch me!"

Remizkin went squatting and tapping his heels on the parquet floor, bouncing on his knees and going painstakingly through all the six steps of a popular Ural dance, known as the "Six-Step." With a final tapping of his heels he dashed up to Chudinov and after catching his breath began to read proudly what was printed on the wet sheet.

"Just listen to this: 'In token of the tenth anniversary of Zemogorsk and the successes that its inhabitants have scored in ore-mining as well as in construction work, and considering the mass scale of sports activities in Zemogorsk. . . .' Did you hear that? 'Mass scale.' Good, eh? '...the Physical Culture and Sports Committee has decided to hold the Annual Ski Tournament with the Crystal Cup as its prize in Zemogorsk.'"

Once more he broke into a tap dance and was on the point of making at Chudinov with open arms when again the sight of Chudinov's

game leg stopped him. He merely waved his hand and as he ran to the door he shouted, "I'll go and tell our Young Communist Leaguers about it. We'll live to see our town a great sports centre!"

From that day on, ski training was given more and more attention in Zemogorsk. Apart from Natasha, other girls skiers were training assiduously. Masha Bogdanova, persevering, brimming with cheerfulness and zeal, was making marked headway. The first trial runs showed unexpected results. Timed for a two-mile run Masha and her other friends proved no worse than Natasha.

When this happened, Natasha said to Chudinov, "You're wasting your time on me. I used to do better than that before we began training. You've muddled me completely."

"It's not that you've grown worse, it's that the others have become better," Chudinov replied. "And you're still at that stage when you're shedding your old coat and haven't got into your new one yet. You must have patience. Besides, I've timed you only for short runs. There you didn't really have a chance to show your powers of endurance and reserve of energy. That is why your results have been approximately the same as those of the others. When we begin increasing the distance of our trial runs I'm certain you'll leave all the other girls far behind. But before we do that, we still have to polish up a thing or two, such as the technique of your start, for instance. You start out splendidly but then you don't work your knees properly and that's an obstacle. You mustn't lose heart." He took out his stop-watch. "Let's start. There's very little time remaining before the Tournament. Don't expect any quarter from me."

She expected none and wanted none.

THE MIRROR GROWS MISTY

Alisa Baburina was not wasting her time either. She was practising under a new coach, Zakraisky, an extremely voluble man with perfect diction and a knack for using high-falutin language.

"It's a pity," he would tell Alisa, "that your former trainer did not give due consideration to your individual traits as a skier. Far be it from me to censure the method of my predecessor. Comrade Chudinov, no doubt, was quite a remarkable person, and an eminent skier in his time. But he held indisputable that which sportsmen the world over had long abandoned. I have in mind the strict daily routine upon which he insisted and considered necessary for sportsmen. He had to a certain extent victimized you, whereas for you with your polished technique such restrictions are, from my point of view, quite superfluous. Your technique is bound to see you through anything."

Alisa found her new coach's way of thinking quite to her liking. As to the fussy Tyulkin, he was completely charmed by Zakraisky, drinking in his grandiloquence and considering him the epitome of culture.

"What a head he's got!" Tyulkin said rapturously when we met on Lenin Hills near Moscow University to watch a ski-jumping contest. "You should hear him speak at meetings. He's a storehouse of culture, and what's more, right from the start he and I became great friends. I got his daughter a pair of Norwegian skis and a dandy sweater for himself. The fellow knows the value of a friend like me—not a bit like Chudinov who doesn't give a hang what he wears. That old checkered blazer of his he's been wearing since 1939."

But at the meet in Kirov Alisa was in such poor form that she showed worse time than the year before and finished fourth. This caused quite

a bit of anxiety in the Mayak Sports Association. The system of the new coach was looked into and condemned: he had let Alisa have her way in all things, was completely under her thumb, obeyed her every whim. The ungrateful, predatory Alisa herself declared at one of the meetings of the ski section that Zakraisky was good at talking but not much good at anything else. And that was the end of him.

Zakraisky was succeeded by Korotkov, a very experienced skier. And the first thing he did—and that without fearing to injure his dignity—was to write to Stepan Chudinov for a training schedule and suggestions. Chudinov replied promptly with a detailed description of training exercises and sent Korotkov his sympathies—he would have no easy time with that proud and spoilt lady. The latter, of course, knew nothing of this correspondence. Catching sight of me at an ice-hockey match, Alisa left her box and even condescended to have a chat with me.

“Hello, Car! Well, what does your deserter friend write? I hear he’s training again. Couldn’t stay away, could he?”

I told Alisa what I knew about Stepan from a line he dropped me now and then.

“The Ski Tournament will be held in Zemogorsk,” Alisa said thoughtfully. “Oh, I can see through him, he’s gone over there just to spite me. Only why did he have to invent all sorts of excuses? Well, I guess we’ll meet soon. They tell me he’s dug up a new star. Don’t tell me it’s Natasha Skuratova, the girl I beat so badly in Podrezkovo. It makes me laugh to think she can be any good. She skis like a snowsweeper, plenty of swing but no speed. She’ll find there’s no room on the ski course for both of us.”

I wrote of this talk to Chudinov, hoping he would pass on to Natasha what Alisa had said about her and in this way rouse her competitive spirit.

His reply ran as follows:

"Dear Yevgeny, I'm glad you think of me now and then. I can't write much because I'm very busy right now. As to Alisa, remind her of the fairy-tale about Snowwhite and the dwarfs. Like the wicked fairy in it, she wants the mirror to tell her that she's the fairest and cleverest of all. But the mirror grows misty and has no reply. Let me tell you that Natasha is in every way superior to her. I have faith in Natasha and what is more important she now has faith in me."

Chudinov was eager to increase Natasha's training time by an hour at least. That was not an easy thing to do. Natasha had her classes and the children to help with their homework. She was kept busy at school a good part of the day. But Chudinov was determined to find a way out of the situation. Rather than ask favours of others he decided to fall back on his own resourcefulness in this matter. With his mind made up, he repaired to the boarding-school.

He found the children at their desks doing their homework. On seeing Chudinov enter, they jumped to their feet with joy. For one thing they were glad to see him, for another, they were even gladder at the opportunity his visit afforded of pushing aside their schoolbooks and scribblers. But Chudinov, wise to their little tricks, raised his hand in stern command.

"Keep your seats! Where's your teacher?"

Seryozha, who had resumed his seat, raised his hand.

"Let me answer!" Instantly he was on his feet again. "Teacher will be here in a minute—to see if we've done our homework. She went to see about our supper. We're going to have jam tarts."

"What's your homework for tomorrow?" Chudinov asked unexpectedly.

"A very hard sum." The children began to speak all at once. "Nobody can do it. We keep adding and adding and still it doesn't come out."

Chudinov sat down at the teacher's desk.

"You can't do your sum and I can't get on with my training because of you. Why can't you learn properly how to do sums? Now let's see what it is. Only don't all speak at once and don't rise, I'll come up to each one of you."

He squeezed in beside Seryozha at his little desk.

"Well, what's so hard about it? Look at the mess you've made in your copy-book! Now let's work on it together. Look, all your figures are crooked and uneven. No wonder you can't add them up. Write them down in even lines. And now let's add. Put the plus sign and draw a line under the sum—a beautiful straight line, mind you. Good! Now add!... One to carry. That's right, add again. See how simple it is. I bet you have spent an hour doing a silly little sum like that and kept your teacher in all that time. Now quick, everybody, do the sum."

The children again jumped to their feet waving their copy-books.

"I can't do the sum, help me!"

"Me, too!"

"Silence! No talking."

Chudinov moved from desk to desk, helping each child.

"Now children," he said when all the sums were done. "Do you care for your teacher?"

"We do!" cried the children in chorus.

"If you do, prove it by studying well." He bent down towards their desks, cast a sly look round, and added, "At least until the ski meet is over. You want your teacher to win the Crystal Cup, don't you?"

He strode over to the blackboard, seized the chalk, and with no more than two or three strokes drew the Crystal Cup.

"See what a pretty cup it is, made of pure crystal and set in silver. Do you want us to win it? Or don't you?"

"We do!"

"I should say you do! And so, little devils, see that your homework

is done properly and in good time. That'll give teacher more hours for training. I really need your help badly." Lowering his voice, he added, "If you find your sums difficult, send Seryozha over to the hotel. He and I are old friends, we'll manage to do the sums together."

The little faces turned to Chudinov were full of admiration. What a capital fellow he was, the children thought. Even their teacher, who knew everything and was so clever, respected him greatly. He must be a very important person.

So absorbed were the children that they did not notice Taisya Valeryanovna, the superintendent, enter, and saw her only when she was at the blackboard. They all jumped to their feet. Chudinov seemed to shrink in her presence. Taisya Valeryanovna shook her head and said disapprovingly, "Comrade Chudinov, will you tell me what you are doing here with the children?"

Well, and what a clever, educated, and important person Taisya Valeryanovna must be, thought the children, to make Chudinov, who was their own teacher's instructor, quail before her and turn red like a little boy caught at some trick. It all seemed very puzzling to them.

"Taisya Valeryanovna," Chudinov began falteringly, "I'm here because something must be done to relieve Natasha of some of her duties. The annual Ski Tournament is just round the corner, you know."

Taisya Valeryanovna motioned to him to step out into the hall with her.

"You have great faith in Natasha, haven't you?" she asked when they were alone.

"Taisya Valeryanovna!" he said with sudden feeling. "Why, she's an exceptional girl. A rough diamond. Here's my hand on it!" He seized her by the hand. "Natasha's got such latent strength in every movement."

Hastily she withdrew her hand.

"Sorry, have I hurt you?"

"You, too, have a good deal of strength in that hand of yours," she said, smiling and rubbing her hand. "But I beg you not to interfere with the education of the children. Let them do their own sums. I'll see to it that Natasha has more free time."

Chudinov took his leave and as he strode down the street, Taisya Valeryanovna stood looking at him out of the window for quite a long time. Smiling to herself, she shook a finger at his back. Natasha walked in.

"I hear Chudinov was here?" she asked casually.

"Yes, came to see me on business for just a minute."

"Always on business and always for just a minute. What a strange person. A human stop-watch, that's what he is!"

Taisya Valeryanovna gave her a searching look.

Chudinov's knee joint was again giving him trouble—the strenuous training was telling on it. So much so that of late he had found it difficult to follow his plan. And he was a coach who was not satisfied with merely mapping out distances and schedules, timing his trainees and shouting commands. He had to be alongside his trainee all the time, polishing up every step and movement on the run.

There came a day when he was unable to drag himself to the office. Balancing his bandaged leg on one chair, Chudinov propped up his draughtsman's board on another and tacked a sheet of paper on it. Little Seryozha knocked lightly on the half-open door.

"Come in, Seryozha," said Chudinov and motioned to the child to come closer. "What brought you here? Is your answer wrong again?"

"It is!" replied Seryozha, his eyes wandering round the room and settling on Chudinov's checkered blazer, hanging on the back of a chair.

The missing button was now in its place.

Seryozha, greatly baffled, gazed fascinated at it and was on the point of saying something when he recalled the promise he had given me and swallowed his words.

"Will the tournament be held soon?" he permitted himself to ask.

"Quite soon," Chudinov replied. "Now let's see your sum. Why doesn't it come right?"

They spent some time doing the sum. When they finally got the correct answer, Chudinov leaned back on the couch. He was tired and felt somewhat feverish. "Have you done your oral work?" he asked. "See that you do everything!"

"I've learned everything. The other kids too," Seryozha hastened to reply.

"Good! But I shall have to lose two days because of my leg—sprained it a little while training. That nasty leg of mine—keeps letting me down all the time."

"Got a bullet in it at the war?" Seryozha asked.

"So I did, my little friend."

"Was it from a gun or from an automatic rifle?"

"An automatic rifle. No more questions! Go to your teacher and tell her that we'll skip tomorrow but the day after I expect her at the usual time. Will you remember that?"

"I will!" answered Seryozha, his gaze again on the freshly sewn button of the checkered blazer hanging on the back of the chair.

"So you've sewed it on?"

"What are you talking about?" Chudinov followed the direction of Seryozha's gaze and leaned forward a little. "Ah, that again. Of course, I sewed it on and what was I to do with it? Frame it or something?"

"How did you get it?"

"You gave it away yourself."

"I didn't give it to you," said the utterly bewildered boy.

"It's not important to whom you gave it," said Chudinov. "The important thing is that it's back where it should be. And now run along, I've got to do a stroke of work."

Seryozha lingered in the doorway, stealing another look at the button. It was obvious that there was a question he was dying to ask but, remembering our compact, he kept silent.

When Seryozha was gone, Chudinov turned his attention to the board in front of him. But it was not designs for Zemogorsk's new buildings that he was tracing on it. On the rough sheet tacked on to the board a large water-colour portrait of Natasha was coming to life. Painting was an old hobby of Chudinov's. Of late, too, whenever he had some time to spare, he turned to his hobby. He painted Natasha skiing down a snow-hill, her scarf fluttering behind her and the wind blowing strands of hair broken loose from under her toque.

"Comrade Chudinov," he heard a voice behind the door. Then came a light tap and the door opened a little. "Would you like some hot tea? They've repaired the pipes and the boiler is in order."

It was Aunt Lipa, solicitous of his person as usual.

Hastily Chudinov slipped the portrait behind the couch.

"Thank you, I'd love a glass," he said.

He put the sketch back on the board. "Not bad!" was his own judgement, as he rocked his head from side to side, taking now a close, now a distant view of the sketch. "Upon my word, it's not bad!" he repeated. "Comrade Chudinov, what's the matter with you? Remember your rule about turning cold as snow when on snow. All right, I'll abide by the rule," he said laughing at himself. But he knew that try as he might he could not cast off the spell of Natasha's loveliness.

There was a soft knock on the door.

"The tea? Please bring it in," Chudinov called.

"Why, you're quite an artist," he heard a deep, familiar voice behind him.

He snatched up the sketch and tried to screen it from view but a backward glance told him his precautions were in vain. He made an attempt to rise but couldn't. This only added to his confusion.

"What a pleasant surprise!"

"I came to see how you were. I thought you might need something."

Natasha did not remove her gaze from the portrait.

"Thanks, I need nothing. Sit down, please. I'm all right. It's only my leg. I decided to play around with my paints a little—an old hobby of mine."

"I never imagined you could sketch so wonderfully . . . and me." Shy and radiant, she looked lovelier than ever.

Chudinov felt an explanation was necessary.

"See, that's my usual method," he mumbled, "all part of the job—I mean sketching my trainees in various postures. It helps to bring out the defects in their skiing technique. See, that angle is not quite right. And here, perhaps, I haven't caught the movement. H'm . . . but the anatomy of the movement is there. It requires. . ."

"I see," said Natasha dryly. "Did you make sketches of Alisa Baburina, too?" she asked after a brief silence.

Chudinov found himself at a loss.

"No, I didn't sketch her," he replied truthfully. He saw the smile Natasha was keeping back and hastily added, "In Moscow things are different. We can have all the movements filmed. But here I've got to sketch, see. . . ." (How he hated himself. Why was he making those stupid excuses. Why couldn't he drop the official manner and tell this girl what he really felt. No! On snow be cold as snow.) Yet he said, "Natasha, I think the world of you!"

Natasha knew he meant what he had said and was deeply touched.

"Stepan Mikhailovich," she said, "you've no idea how much you've done for me. You've made a different person out of me. I really feel like the awakened Snowwhite in the fairy-tale."

There was a pause. It seemed that the invisible wall which was there between them all the time was crumbling at last. Chudinov leaned towards the girl and she inclined her head towards him. But then instantly he shrank back. Falling into his usual mentor's tone, though this time his voice sounded a little husky, he said, "Don't you get a swelled head, Natasha. You've got to work even though you're getting along fine."

Disappointed, Natasha stiffened and dropped into an armchair near by.

"Are your trainees nothing to you but running machines on ski or bundles of anatomic movements?"

He smarted under the rebuke.

"Natasha if only I could tell you. . . ." He made a sudden movement but instantly caught at his knee joint. "See, I'm no good. I mustn't talk the way I do. The Ski Tournament is close at hand that's all we must think of now."

"Very well," said Natasha humbly, "I shall think of nothing else."

"That's the spirit," said Chudinov, feeling better and sinking back into the cushions. "Now let me have that sheet of paper on my desk, please. Take a look at the schedule of distances I've jotted down. . . ."

C H A P T E R 15

O N T H E E V E

I flew to Zemogorsk together with the Moscow skiing, skating and ice-hockey teams. I was to send accounts of the Annual Winter Sports Tournament to my paper and report it over the radio.

At the aerodrome in Zemogorsk we were welcomed with a band. The gold of its trumpets shone brightly against the background of the snow-swept aerodrome. The low wintry sun in the cloudless sky, the long bluish shadows, and the many-coloured standards of the local sports societies lent a vivid beauty to the snowy landscape opening to our view as we descended the gangway. I sought Chudinov in the crowd and was surprised that he was not there. But I did not have to look long before I caught sight of old Skuratov, stepping lightly in his trim felt boots beside the towering mayor and other important personalities of the town who had come to greet us.

"Welcome to our town," came the mayor's booming voice.

The mayor introduced me to Natasha's father.

"Meet Comrade Skuratov," he said, "a deputy of the City Soviet, one of our most respected citizens who has had a hand in every one of the town's undertakings, a first-class skier and hunter, and his daughter, by the way, is our best ski-runner."

By that time Natasha Skuratova's fame as a rising star in the ski world had reached the Moscow branch of the Mayak Sports Association. Natasha had made a splendid show at the preliminaries in Sverdlovsk. She did not get a chance to run with Alisa who at that particular time was in Moscow taking part in a tournament with Czech skiers, but everybody knew that the Ural skier had won her right to be on the Mayak representative team and would defend its colours at the Tournament.

Tall, grey-haired, stalwart Korotkov, who arrived with us and looked very much like a jockey in his old-fashioned cap, said that Chudinov was absent because he was probably too busy with the final training sessions.

"Still his not being here is strange," insisted Alisa Baburina, whose vanity was apparently hurt by his absence.

"What with his building job and the training he really is busy," I replied.

"It's not being busy but a change of affections that keeps him away," remarked the perspicacious Tyulkin.

"Whatever makes me tolerate Tyulkin at all, Carichev, do you know?"

"I don't know but I can guess."

"That's more than I can do," Alisa replied.

We elbowed our way to the buses through the crowd which recognized and cheered our champions, Alisa getting more than her due.

About twenty minutes later our buses were speeding down the streets of Zemogorsk, decorated for the Tournament and hardly recognizable because of the many new buildings. I looked out of the frosted windows, in which we made little eye-holes with our warm breath, and could hardly believe what I saw. I recognized houses built after designs shown to me by Chudinov way back in Moscow. Among these were a clubhouse and a cinema theatre. Not far from the woods, on the outskirts, were rows of standard little cottages on the designs of which Chudinov had been working in recent years. That meant all his ideas were little by little being carried into life. Whatever the results of the coming Tournament, it was clear that as an architect Chudinov had not been wasting his time. But, I won't deny it, I was eager for him to score success in the sports field as well.

Filled with sportsmen dressed in their trim slacks and blazers, some carrying skates, others skis or hockey sticks, Zemogorsk looked quite a crowded town. In the distance, the streets extended as before into cuttings. And they vanished into the pine forest which surrounded the town, went winding to the foothills or expanded into white vistas.

Our bus finally pulled up at the Novy Ural Hotel, now completed, with the scaffolding long gone. I entered the familiar lobby through the town's famous revolving door. From the corner of the lobby came Chudinov's voice speaking over the telephone.

"Is this the airport?... Well, have you found out?... Is that so?" He hung up and strode over to Natasha and Seryozha standing some distance away. "Well, it seems they arrived by an earlier plane and left for town half an hour ago. They're due here any minute now."

The glass door kept revolving incessantly, letting through sportsmen who had arrived with me from Moscow. They carried valises, skis and the Crystal Cup wrapped in the seven-coloured banner of the Raduga Sports Association.

Alisa as soon as she saw Chudinov hurried to his side.

"Look, comrades, there he is, the man who's hidden himself away in the Urals. I'm so glad to see you," she said to Chudinov. "We've missed you so much, and I most of all."

"Hello, Alisa," Chudinov said genially. "Hello, Yevgeny, old man!" He gave me a bear hug. "Glad to see you here again."

"Did you expect me to stay away? I'm going to be in the thick of it all. And the press and the radio will be full of you!"

Alisa kept close to Chudinov.

"I've missed you terribly, honest," she was saying. "Comrades, may I on behalf of our team and myself personally give our dear, our incomparable Comrade Chudinov a kiss?"

And flinging her arms around Stepan's neck, she kissed him on the cheek.

Stepan was somewhat embarrassed and I caught him steal a glance at Natasha who was observing the scene from a distance.

Then all at once Chudinov caught Alisa under the arm, and rushed her over to where Natasha was standing.

"Alisa, let me introduce you to Natasha. You'll soon meet on the ski course, but you might as well know each other before that."

Alisa gave her hand to Natasha with studied grace.

"Delighted to meet you," she said.

Natasha's handshake was brief and sincere.

Peeping from behind Natasha, Seryozha also stretched out his broad little hand.

"You, too, want to be introduced?" asked Chudinov. "Meet Seryozha, our most popular little boy."

Tyulkin nudged Alisa.

"So, they've got their own little boy already."

Alisa and Chudinov seated themselves on a couch, somewhat apart from the others and chatted away gaily.

"So this is your new ski star?" said Alisa, casting a glance in Natasha's direction.

"Yes, I have great faith in her."

Alisa looked haughtily at Natasha.

"Nice girl, not bad-looking."

"Wait till you see her on skis, you'll realize she's got something more than good looks," said Chudinov.

Meanwhile Seryozha took me aside and said, "That button, it's been sewed on. And you told me. . . ."

"Remember your promise. Not a word. The Tournament is not over yet, is it?"

"Do I have to keep quiet until it's over?"

"I should think so!"

"You promised to get me tickets to the Tournament."

"And I'll keep my promise," I assured him and playfully pulled his fur cap down over his nose.

Tyulkin saw Natasha sitting by herself on a couch near Aunt Lipa's desk and walked over to her. Why stand on ceremony with this provincial girl, he thought. In all the glory of the flashing zippers of his skiing suit he dropped down beside her on the couch. Eyeing her closely, he asked, "So you're the girl Chudinov's training? Glad to make your ac-

quaintance. Is he trying out all his pet theories on you? In Moscow we were just about fed up with them."

"Why do you tell me all this?" Natasha asked in surprise.

"I see what a nice simple-hearted girl you are. And I'm telling you all this as a friend. Another thing I wish to tell you as a friend is that Alisa Baburina is U.S.S.R. ski champion and she's never been in better form than today. To think anyone can hope to excel her is absolute nonsense. You don't know Chudinov. He's a sly fellow, uses real Machiavellian methods when it comes to skiing. What do you think he's after in this meet? He wants you two to pit your strength against each other. He'll make both of you sweat so that the total number of points would win him the Crystal Cup. He doesn't care really who'll be clocked in first you or Baburina. Oh, I could tell you a good deal more about him. But you just turn around and look at those two little doves cooing over there."

Natasha couldn't help glancing at the corner where Alisa and Chudinov sat chatting. Chudinov had his arm on Alisa's shoulder—an old-time habit of his. With his other hand he was making all sorts of motions—apparently showing her some ski movements. Catching Natasha's glance, he withdrew, perhaps a trifle too hastily, his arm from Alisa's shoulder. Natasha rose and swept out of the room, giving the door such a kick that it continued revolving long after she was gone.

Chudinov jumped to his feet.

"Have you been telling stories?" He looked daggers at Tyulkin.

"Goodness! No! Stepan," Tyulkin was at once on the defensive. "Just told her things about Moscow and what a loss your going away has been. I don't know what upset her, really."

"Tyulkin, I know you!" Chudinov took a few short steps and under cover of his shoulders, so that nobody would see, brandished his fist at him. "You be careful."

The angry flash in his eyes made Tyulkin quail.

"Oh, you all give me a headache," he said.

Aunt Lipa hearing him, promptly advised, "Why not step in to our barbershop and freshen up after the trip?"

Aunt Lipa's magnificent bulk filled Tyulkin with admiration.

"Ever worked in a circus?" he asked.

"Oh, I haven't any talent in that direction," Aunt Lipa replied modestly. "But I used to be in charge of a team of dockers. Then I began getting pains in my back, because of the dampness, I guess, and had to give it up. Drizhik, our barber, gave me a wonderful ointment. That's the second good thing he did for me. The first was giving cream to remove my freckles. His ointment, I must tell you, cured me completely of all pains."

Drizhik, the little barber, and Tyulkin, the man of business, at once lapsed into an amiable run of chatter.

After lathering the plump cheeks of the newcomer, the barber said, "My creams and ski waxes are very popular in town. I use the finest ingredients."

Tyulkin nodded patronizingly as much as the cloth tied round his neck permitted.

"Do you make a lot of mazoomas on them?" he managed to ask a minute later.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you make much money on them?"

The little barber was deeply offended.

"You misunderstand me. I charge nothing. I prepare them only for friends. Besides I take a scientific interest in such things. I supply our skiers with waxes. Winter weather here is so changeable and the snow

so peculiar that we need special wax. Our hunters, for example, have their own secret recipes. I suppose you've heard about that?"

Tyulkin at once pricked up his ears. He drew his hands out from under the cloth to remove the lather round his mouth.

"Sure, I heard all about it. I know how splendid your waxes are. They make the skis all but glide by themselves. I wonder if you can let me have about a pound of wax for my own personal use."

"Are you sure you want it for yourself?" Drizhik asked.

"Of course, I go skiing week-ends. Meanwhile I should like to give you a souvenir." He fumbled in his pocket under the cloth and pulled out an elaborate pen-knife. The knife when open looked like a lobster. Tyulkin stretched it out to the barber.

"Take it please as a token of my respect for you and the pleasant acquaintance we've struck up. Here see my name's on it—'Kolya.' I'll be happy if you accept it as a gift from me."

The little barber looked at the pen-knife and found it very much to his liking.

"Though I come from Mariupol, my loyalties are with Zemogorsk." He spread fresh lather over Tyulkin's face. "I hear a ski champion has arrived from Moscow. Well, I can tell you confidentially, she doesn't stand a chance against our champion Natasha Skuratova."

Tyulkin scowled beneath the mask of lather covering half his face and condemning him to silence.

The barber bent down over him.

"Anything bothering you?" he asked. "Why, it's even funny to think that Natasha Skuratova will lose to that girl. You should have seen her hand it to them all at the preliminaries in Sverdlovsk. She is coached by Chudinov, Merited Master of Sports. They say he left Moscow especially to come here and make a world ski champion of her."

That was too much for Tyulkin who had always been a devoted fan

of Alisa. His blood was up. He jumped to his feet, the lather spattering in all directions, half his face shaved, the other half covered with lather, and brushed aside the razor in the barber's hand.

"Funny, you say? Why, Alisa Baburina wouldn't even bother to snap her fingers at that Natasha Skuratova of yours. You don't know how famous Baburina is. Why, Marshal Budyonny shook her hand and congratulated her on her success. And, you come here talking about that Natasha Skuratova of yours. Ha! ha! That's the best one I've heard in a long while."

The little barber folded the napkin, gingerly dropped the shaving brush into the cup and said quietly, with a touch of sadness in his voice, "Tell me did I hear you right when you said something about snapping fingers at Natasha Skuratova?"

And without waiting for an answer, he seized the brush out of the cup and thrust it back with such violence that he spattered the mirror with soap. He moved the shaving kit farther from the edge of the table. Then, with trembling fingers, he set about removing the cloth from round Tyulkin's neck. Crumpling it, he threw it on the table.

"Sorry, you'll have to go to the barber's across the street."

"Man, are you off your mind?" Tyulkin shouted indignantly, wiping with the towel his shaved cheek and passing his hand over the lathered one. "Where will I go in this state with one side of the face shaved and the other lathered?"

The barber answered in his usual mild tone of voice, but there was an undercurrent of rage in it, "It will do just as well for you to go across the street. I shall not have anything to do with people who are so unfair in their judgement."

He turned on the tap and began vigorously scrubbing his hands, picked up a nail-brush, worked with it for some time, then shook the water off his fingers.

Sensing trouble and knowing how easily offended Natasha was, Chudinov hurried to the boarding-school.

"Is your teacher upstairs?"

"No, she's not in," Seryozha replied. "She went home, I think."

Much as he didn't relish the idea, Chudinov went off to the Skuratovs.

A smell of turpentine and of burning greeted him on the porch. When he entered the house, Natasha's father came out of the kitchen to bid him welcome. He motioned to Chudinov to follow and, asking him to wait for a while, resumed the business of cooking some strange-smelling mixture on the range. He poured it from one cauldron into another, smelt it, stirred it with a chip of wood, doing it all with a very mysterious air and filling the whole house with acrid fumes.

"Natasha's not in," he told Chudinov as he pottered about, half-hidden in clouds of smoke. "What with her teaching the children and the hours she spends training, she doesn't have time to come to see us as often as she should nowadays. By the way, do you think she has a chance of winning?"

"Her chances are good, but her stubbornness..." Chudinov complained.

"Her stubbornness—well, that's her mother's strain in her, can't be helped. What about that Moscow girl? You don't think she can beat Natasha and put us all to shame as she did last year?"

"I hope not!"

"Well, you're the one who'll answer for it if she does. Now look, I've prepared some special wax for Natasha to use. It looks like we're going to have some very frosty weather. And I think this wax'll do the trick. The recipe is a family secret. But I'll trust you with it. Though I don't think so very much of your new-fangled ways of skiing, I have faith in you. Give the wax to Natasha—there are three different kinds

of it in three jars. Here—the wax in this jar with the three crosses is for very frosty weather. But Natasha knows, she's been using them many a time.”

Old Skuratov handed Chudinov three jars each with wax of a different colour.

CHAPTER 16

A MYSTERIOUS MASK AND A MYSTERIOUS WAX

I met Chudinov that evening in the park where a carnival had been arranged to mark the opening of the Annual Winter Sports Tournament. The centre had been turned into a huge skating-rink. Garlands of little lanterns strung up above it shimmered in the mirror-like surface, and skaters in bright masquerade costumes glided back and forth along its tin-foil paths. Strains of music poured from numerous loud-speakers.

A crowd of merry-makers stood around the middle of this rink, brightly lit by searchlights, and watched a “giraffe” whirling and cutting capers. To everyone’s delight, its forelegs were going in one direction and the hind legs in another. Encouraged by the applause and the continual laughter and cheers of the spectators, the “giraffe” reared almost vertically and began waving the skates on its forelegs in the air. After that it collapsed and went somersaulting on the ice. When it rose, its hind legs were again going one way and the forelegs another. The crowd rollicked with laughter.

All the while brightly-costumed skaters were sweeping down the icy paths. There were cavaliers in medieval cloaks, driving their masked ladies in sledges in front of them. The skates rang against the ice and the

coloured lanterns rocked in the tingling snowy air. Beams of different colour directed by the searchlights on the costumed figures made them appear all red one minute, and green, gold or orange the next. Song, laughter, merriment, shouting voices and whirling skaters filled the park.

Chudinov, grim, but determined-looking was elbowing his way through the crowd, thinking how badly he fitted in with the general picture of carnival gaiety.

I was with Alisa Baburina on the terrace of a park restaurant. We caught sight of Chudinov's hurrying figure and called to him.

"Have you seen Natasha Skuratova?" he asked before even greeting us.

"She'll turn up, don't worry," Alisa laughed. "Come and join us. What about some mulled wine?"

"I think I saw her go down that path over there," I said. "She seemed upset about something. Quarrelling again? That's hardly the time for it."

"I should say it isn't," Chudinov mumbled. "Some temper she's got!"

Alisa shot a sly, mocking glance at him.

"She's probably hiding behind a mask. And what can I do, Stepan, to make you notice an old friend?"

"I can help you to find her—for old friends' sake—and make a radio announcement," I offered. "Something like this: 'Attention, Natasha Skuratova, your coach is looking for you.'"

"Thanks, I can do very well without your help," he replied testily. "You said you saw her go down that path?"

"Stepan," I shouted as he went off in the direction I had pointed. "I've got to have a word with you. Excuse me, Alisa, I'll be back in a minute."

"Bring some hot coffee on your way back, and don't be long over your secrets, you—birds of a feather," Alisa said tartly.

I overtook Chudinov.

"Things in bad shape again?" I asked sympathetically.

"You've said it!" Chudinov made a despairing gesture. "It's my fault this time. I should have. . . ."

"Taken into account feminine temperament? But there is no time for consideration. Better go and make it up with her at once."

"That's exactly what I want to do. But where shall I find her?"

"I told you in what direction she went. Hurry! I'm off for the coffee."

Natasha was sitting alone on a bench in a remote corner of the park. Strains of music and peals of laughter came to her ears, making her feel even sadder and more despondent. It hurt her to sit there alone amidst all the merriment that was going on. But she had no desire to mix with the revellers.

Suddenly a strange masked figure appeared on the path near by and began moving towards her. A moment later a man in a black cloak and a plumed wide-brimmed hat stood by her side. He held the flap of his cloak to his face, partly concealed by a mask.

"Hail and hearken to my words!" he said in a sepulchral voice.

"And who may this scarecrow be?" Natasha asked in a not too friendly tone.

Bending slightly over her he went on very mysteriously, "I am the man who saved thee from the storm."

"You, too. Well, you're the fourth, then. There must have been a whole rescue squad. Well, if you're one of them, better speak to Donat Remizkin of the *Zemogorsk Worker* about it."

"I rescued thee and thy charge," the masked man went on.

"Will you leave me alone, please. I forgot about that rescue business a long time ago."



"And I am here to remind thee of it," the strange creature continued hollowly. "I gave thee brandy from my flask, I put my scarf around thy neck and I said, 'I'll carry the boy. Can you walk? Help is close at hand.' Were these not my very words?"

Natasha eyed the stranger, puzzled. No, the other man was taller. But what was she to do? Show her anger and drive him away rudely or accept the whole thing as a carnival prank.

"I spoke thus, didn't I?" the masked man repeated. It was obvious that he was trying to disguise his voice.

"All right, you did. That is, not you, but the man who really saved us."

"I rescued thee because thou art a great skier and thou must bring glory to our town," the man went on. "And now repair to thy teacher and. . . ."

Natasha flared up.

"Cut out this tomfoolery and stop meddling in other people's affairs."

"I obey thee and shall retire into the mysterious sphere whence I come," said the man. "But do not forget my words. When the race is won, the mystery shall be unravelled. Remember the initial on the scarf I gave thee?"

He opened his cloak and Natasha caught sight of a neckerchief with the same initial embroidered on it as on the scarf she remembered so well. The next instant he flung the cloak over his shoulder and said:

"Look over there!"

Natasha turned to look in the direction he had indicated. She could see nothing and turned again to him. He was gone. Only his black cloak rustled among the snow-swept thicket, reminding her that he had been there at all.

For a minute or so Natasha wondered who the fellow could be, and then started out in the direction whence came the strains of an orchestra.

I was annoyed to find a long queue at the coffee counter and had to wait quite a while before I could fill my flask. When I reached the terrace with the thermos flask and some pastry, I found Natasha standing there talking to Alisa.

Apparently Natasha had been asking her whether she had seen Chudinov.

"He's just been looking for you," Alisa explained. "He went off with Carichev. Ah, at last!" she cried on catching sight of me "I'm frozen to death, give me the coffee, quick! Natasha, would you like a cup? Let's get closer acquainted. Chudinov used to tell me that to know one's opponent well was a good thing."

Natasha sat down at our table, but her eye roved towards the end of the walk.

"I know you well enough," she said. "You left me far behind in Moscow. I feel ashamed even to think of it. And from Chudinov I keep hearing: 'Baburina this and Baburina that' all the time."

Alisa, pleased, smiled.

"So, he's given away to you all my secrets. Supposing you let me in on one of your secrets, Natasha. I mean your special waxes. I hear they're quite marvellous."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when a masked figure in a wide-brimmed hat with a plume appeared from among the trees. Natasha kept looking at the end of the path.

"Well how about those top-secret waxes of yours?" Alisa repeated her question.

"There's no secret about them. I can share them with you if you wish," Natasha replied. She noticed now the masked stranger behind a tree. Was it the same man who had spoken to her, she wondered.

That very moment he snatched off his mask. It was Tyulkin.

Not he, Natasha decided.

"That's exactly what I say," Tyulkin broke in joyfully. "You're quite right, Natasha, what secrets can there be among friends? If we win, the cup'll be ours, we'll share the glory. We won't give away the secret of your wax recipe. Not a word to anyone, I say. And what do you say, Carichev?"

"Mum's the word, I say," I promised. "That's in line with my radio commentator's job of talking much and saying nothing."

Natasha rose.

"Chudinov must have gone home," she said. "And it's time I went, too. Good-bye!"

Tyulkin followed her down the walk. When he was at her side, he asked, "What about the wax?"

"Haven't received it yet," said Natasha. "As soon as I do, I'll share it with Alisa."

"Good!" said Tyulkin jubilantly.

In a side alley of the park sat Chudinov, absently tracing Natasha's name with a sprig on the smooth snow sparkling with the light cast by the swinging Japanese lanterns. Hearing the sound of footsteps and seeing Natasha approach, he quickly began levelling the snow with his foot. But she was at his side before he had erased the first letter of her name. Natasha's eye caught it. She dropped down silently on the bench

and taking the sprig out of his hand, she beat down the snow and drew the letter 'S' beside the 'N'. A faint smile appeared on Stepan's face.

Natasha was the first to break the silence.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked. "Please, don't be. I admit I was wrong. Something got into me. It's all over now. I realize how stupid it is to quarrel at a time like this. I'll come to train as usual at eight tomorrow. Do you forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive. I'm not angry with you, Natasha," Chudinov said. "I've been looking for you all evening. We've nothing to quarrel about."

"All right, let's not talk about it any more," Natasha said. "Did you really think I would let you down at a time like this? Only there's one thing I want to tell you: I feel terribly sad. Today I've realized. . . ."

"What have you realized?" asked Chudinov.

"I've realized that you're doing all this for Alisa Baburina, that you want to prove to her. . . ."

Chudinov sprang to his feet, for some reason snatched the sprig out of Natasha's hand, and flung it angrily into the bushes.

"Natasha, why must you keep harping on Alisa. Do you think she's the hub of the universe?"

"It seems to me you think that!"

"I don't, and I advise you not to think that either. Remember you're going to have to do with at least a dozen ski-runners that are no worse than Alisa Baburina. There is Zinaida Avdoshina from Vologda, you saw her in Sverdlovsk, and Balavayeva from Kirov, Rumyantseva, Nina Gvakharia. And all I hear is Baburina, Baburina!"

Natasha laughed from sheer joy.

"Scold me, scold me some more," she said.

Chudinov resumed his seat and gently drew Natasha down beside him.

"I depend on you Natasha to be clocked in first." Gravely he added, "Only it won't be easy, I warn you. The chances are pretty much the same."

"No, mine are better," Natasha said with vehemence.

There was an expression on her face Chudinov had never seen before.

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"Because, because I've got you behind me," she said, gazing into his face. She paused, rose abruptly and looked away.

Chudinov gave her a grateful look, took her gloved hand in his and pressed it lightly.

"So, I've won the trust of the Skuratovs at last," he said half in jest. "And, by the way, your father's asked me to give these jars of wax to you."

From that day on, the Annual Winter Sports Tournament was in the focus of attention. No sooner was work over than the miners and concentration mill workers hurried to the stadium to watch the events. Competition was keenest and excitement particularly great during the last decisive days. There were such events as the men's thirty- and fifty-kilometre runs and the women's relay run in which Mayak's girl skiers showed good time. Natasha had outstripped the Raduga skier, making the score even, while Alisa Baburina running the last lap forged ahead to win the day for Mayak.

Raduga and Mayak were now far ahead of the other teams. They were old rivals and it was clear that one of them would get the Crystal Cup. The day before the finals, Mayak was a few points behind Raduga. This was due to the fact that the men had performed worse in their

relay than it had been expected. It now remained for the girls in their ten-kilometre run to decide the day.

The night before the finals the club arranged a get-together for the visiting and local sportsmen. Natasha sat next to Masha Bogdanova. She heard famous skaters, skiers and hockey-players address the audience. Klieg lights flashed, bathing the hall in a bluish glow. Among the speakers were many sportsmen whose photographs Natasha had seen in the newspapers. As soon as they were announced, cameramen rushed forward, climbed on to chairs and with spotlights directed on the platform began to shoot. The mayor, who presided, gave the floor to Alisa Baburina. She was met with cheers and applause. But Chudinov when he rose to speak received more applause and even a friendlier reception. It was clear to Natasha now that Chudinov was a popular and important figure in the sports world. The audience was on its feet and applauded so long that it was some time before Chudinov could begin his speech. He stood blinking in the glare of the spotlights which revealed the scar on his temple and grey strands of hair here and there. Masha Bogdanova applauded so loudly and long that Natasha finally pulled her by the hand and made her sit down. Natasha herself was happy and proud to see Chudinov so warmly cheered by the audience and hear him welcome the visiting sportsmen on behalf of their Zemogorsk colleagues.

When the speeches were over, the floor was cleared for dancing. Tyulkin lost no time in dashing up to Natasha, cavalier style.

"May I have this dance?" he asked.

"Sorry, I've promised it to Comrade Chudinov," replied Natasha, looking for Chudinov in the crowd. He was not far away and had heard her. He shrugged his shoulders in surprise but guessing that she wished to be rid of Tyulkin, stepped up to her and slipped his arm confidently round her waist, whispering into her ear, "You know I'm not much of a dancer."

"Never mind," Natasha whispered back. "I'd much rather dance with you than with that fellow. I'm sick to death of him!"

"So, you're choosing the lesser of two evils," said Chudinov smiling.

They waltzed among the dancers while Tyulkin followed at a distance, waiting for the dance to end, peeping now from behind a column, now over the shoulders of the dancers.

"What's eating Tyulkin, I wonder," said Chudinov. But then he glanced quickly at his watch and let out a whistle. "No more dancing, Natasha! It's time to go home. We have a hard day ahead of us tomorrow."

"One more dance," Natasha begged.

"No, time for you to be in bed," Chudinov said firmly. "You're forgetting about tomorrow."

"Is there nothing in the world that interests you besides skiing?" Natasha asked gloomily.

"For the present nothing," he said and added musingly, "I may begin taking an interest in other things—but only after the Tournament. And now let's get going."

He took her arm but she broke away from him and hurried to the exit. Chudinov followed her with his eyes, uncertain what to do. His face darkened and he heaved a sigh. The mayor was at his side.

"I can see you're upset, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Hurt Natasha's feelings again. She's dying to dance and I've sent her off to bed. Strict rules!"

"What d'you reckon tomorrow will show?"

"No need to reckon, the clock will do the reckoning," replied Chudinov and hastily strode off to the exit.

It was a glorious night, but the frost was growing severer and breathing more difficult; the icy air seemed to tingle with myriads of tiny needles and they pricked and stung the flesh.

Chudinov overtook Natasha. He insisted on seeing her home. They climbed to the top of a hill and paused to rest for a while. Below them spread the park with its alleys turned into skating-rinks. Beyond it the moon-bathed snows stretched to the pale slopes of distant mountains. Silver-lined clouds streaked the sky overhead. To the left the city lights flickered in the frosty darkness and seemed to crackle in the air. Now and then wind-borne strains of music came from the park. Natasha and Chudinov stood side by side, spellbound by the beauty of the night, drinking in its every sound.

"It's a divine night, isn't it?" Natasha said dreamily.

"Yes, a devilishly fine night."

Chudinov squared his shoulders, took a deep breath of the nipping air and gently nudged Natasha. They must go on.

Natasha begged, "Let's stay here for just a little while longer. We can hear the music so well."

They listened to the strains of a waltz, now distinct, now faint.

"It's so quiet," said Chudinov. "Makes one feel afloat with the stars in the infiniteness of space."

Appearing from behind the shadow of a passing cloud, the moon cast its silver beam on Natasha's face, making the girl look so lovely Chudinov could not keep his eyes away. Slowly she turned her face to him. He saw it glow with an inner light. An open, trusting and sweet face, inclining towards him. He, too, involuntarily bent forward, then checked himself and even jerked his head back. Natasha was looking expectantly at him.

"Nervous?" asked Chudinov.

"No!" Natasha tossed her head back proudly.

"That's bad! You ought to be nervous."

"All right, I am nervous. Set your mind at rest!"

"Why should I? I'm not nervous."

Natasha twitched her shoulder.

"Oh, of course, nothing makes any difference to you so long as Mayak wins the cup."

"I am nervous. Set your mind at rest." Chudinov mimicked her.

On approaching the boarding-school they caught sight of a figure walking up and down the porch; now and then it jumped up into the air, fiercely clapping its sides and shoulders with crossed arms, skipped and uttered strange sounds.

"Who is that, I wonder?" said Chudinov.

Gently he drew Natasha behind himself and strode to the porch.

"It's me, Stepan Mikhailovich," a familiar voice came through chattering teeth.

"Tyulkin! Good evening! What are you doing here?"

Poor Tyulkin continued clapping his sides to keep warm.

"Oh, I was out for a stroll, got frozen a bit and thought I would drop in to warm up. I rang the bell but the children wouldn't let me in, thought I was a bogey man. So I decided to wait around here." He rubbed hard his frozen ears. "The frost's bad, but I wanted to take a look at the town all the same—and besides I felt like doing a little thinking in the quiet of the night."

"So at your age you've finally taken to thinking?" Chudinov asked with a chuckle. "As far as I can remember you never went in for that sort of thing before."

Tyulkin sighed bitterly.

"It's all very well for you to crack jokes at a lonely chap's expense when you've a girl at your side. But I've got nobody, nobody in the whole wide world." He was almost on the verge of tears. "All I have is a pack of troubles, and not a word of thanks from anyone. My business

is to supply everybody with everything, see to everything—sharpen skates, wax skis, supply sporting kit. If anything goes wrong, I'm the one who's held responsible. And, by the way, Natasha, what about those waxes you've promised? All I seem to be hearing around here is how wonderful these waxes are, but how am I to lay my hands on them? And they say the snow is quite different here."

"I don't know about the snow being different," said Natasha, "but our waxes are really quite famous."

"Your wax recipes are supposed to be a great secret. Everything is a secret here. Even that brave fellow who's saved you and some little boy on that stormy night also keeps it all a secret."

"Stop your philosophizing," Chudinov interrupted him quickly, "and tell us what exactly has brought you here. Natasha has to go to bed."

"I've come for these waxes, if you want to know. It's part of my job to supply my people with the best of everything, but these waxes, they are not to be bought."

Chudinov gave Natasha a long searching look.

"Trying your best for Baburina, aren't you?" Natasha said with an understanding nod. "All right, I'll gladly let you have the waxes you want. Father himself prepared them for me. Wouldn't trust anybody else. Come in, but very quietly. It's late."

Softly they walked up the stairs to the music room.



"Don't make any noise, the children are asleep," Natasha warned them in a whisper. "I'll bring the waxes in a minute, they're in my room."

Natasha left them for a short while and soon returned with a little valise which she opened and placed on the table in front of Tyulkin.

"Take any of them you please. The jar with the three crosses is for very frosty weather. Take it, I've got more of it. And it's getting colder."

She passed into the hall, unbuttoning her fur coat as she went. Chudinov helped her to remove her coat and hung it up for her.

Meanwhile Tyulkin eagerly examined the contents of the valise. Three almost identical jars attracted his attention. He began looking them over and was on the point of taking the one with three crosses in blue pencil when his eye fell on a jar in the corner of the valise. It had been pushed behind by a pocket-mirror and was half concealed by a little woollen scarf. Tyulkin picked it up quickly and read the label: "Special Mixture. For use in severe frost. Recipe by A. O. Drizhik."

"Aha! That's the secret wax. You're smart, young lady, but you can't put it over old Tyulkin."

He smelled the jar, looked stealthily into the hall to make sure that Natasha and Chudinov were still there and hastily slipped the jar with Drizhik's mixture into his pocket.

"I shall be everlastingly grateful to you, and so will the Mayak," said Tyulkin pompously to Natasha when she re-entered. "You've been splendid. I tell you I would fling myself into fire and water for a girl like you, let alone braving a blizzard or two. I hope that shows you what a fellow I am. Well, ta-ta! Pleasant dreams!"

"I suppose you'll be waxing Baburina's skis for her," Chudinov asked. "Your Alisa has certainly become a grand lady. You've spoiled her completely!"

"What can I do?" said Tyulkin with a gesture of hopelessness. "She is a grand lady, she's got talent. Well, I'm going. What a frost! Nothing but a dot visible on the thermometer. It may be 90 below tomorrow!"

When the front door slammed behind Tyulkin, Chudinov clasped Natasha's hand tightly in both of his.

"I'm proud of you, Natasha," he said, "for giving up the wax to your rival. That's the spirit I admire. And that's my way of doing things."

"Your way?"

"Mine and yours," Chudinov said tenderly.

Everybody was asleep and so they dared not raise their voices above a whisper. And though they spoke of commonplace things all they said seemed marvellous to Natasha. They seemed to share some great secret and there was an undercurrent of deep emotion in their conversation.

"You're praising me now," Natasha was whispering, "yet you used to tell me before that I haven't enough sports temperament."

"And I say that again. Lose your temper and you'll beat your rival. And now let me see you lose it."

He looked intently into her eyes.

Natasha distorted her features and tried to look fierce. She bared her teeth, raised her brows, glared at him and even growled.

"Good," said Chudinov laughing softly, then grew serious. "I expect you to beat Alisa. Good night! Don't forget to lose your temper!"

Zemogorsk was deep in slumber, but its sports lovers did not sleep soundly. They kept tossing from side to side worried even in their sleep about the outcome of the cup finals that were to take place the next day. Alisa Baburina was asleep. Her coach, after a final check-up of the schedule, had retired too. But there was a light burning in our hotel room.

Chudinov paced the room from corner to corner, making sharp turns and mumbling something under his breath.

Returning after a telephone conversation with Moscow to the hotel room I shared with Chudinov, I heard noises to which I had already grown accustomed coming from the room occupied by Tyulkin. The door was half-open, I peeped in and found the room cluttered with all sorts of sporting kit. Tyulkin was sitting at the table before a candle. Over its flame he was heating some wax and applying it to a ski held upright between his knees. It was a splendid-looking ski, slender and gleaming with coloured varnish. At the bindings was a metal plate with the words "To A. Baburina, U.S.S.R. Champion" engraved on it.

Catching sight of me, Tyulkin was about to say something when he sneezed so loudly he almost extinguished the candle. He blew his nose and winked.

"How d'you like that?" he said. "She wanted to palm off the wrong wax on me, and hid away the jar. But you can't put it over Tyulkin!"

CHAPTER 17

MAKE WAY!

The Crystal Cup, in all its sparkling glory, had been placed on a little red table in front of the grand stands. Sportsmen of the Moscow branch of the Raduga Sports Association, thrice winners of the cup, took turns in standing sentry at the table, holding aloft their seven-coloured sports standards. The stadium looked very beautiful on the day of the finals. With the hills rising around it forming a natural amphitheatre, the ice-field below glinting and everything around basking in the glitter of hoar-frost, the stadium resembled a giant crystal bowl.

All the winter sports popular in the Soviet Union were represented here. On plank benches, swept clear of snow, sat famous skiers, skaters, hockey-players and slalom racers from all parts of the land. Brightly varnished skis and hockey sticks flashed above the rows of spectators. On the surface of the lake of which one had a good view from the stadium, glided ice-yachts with their white sails fluttering in the wind.

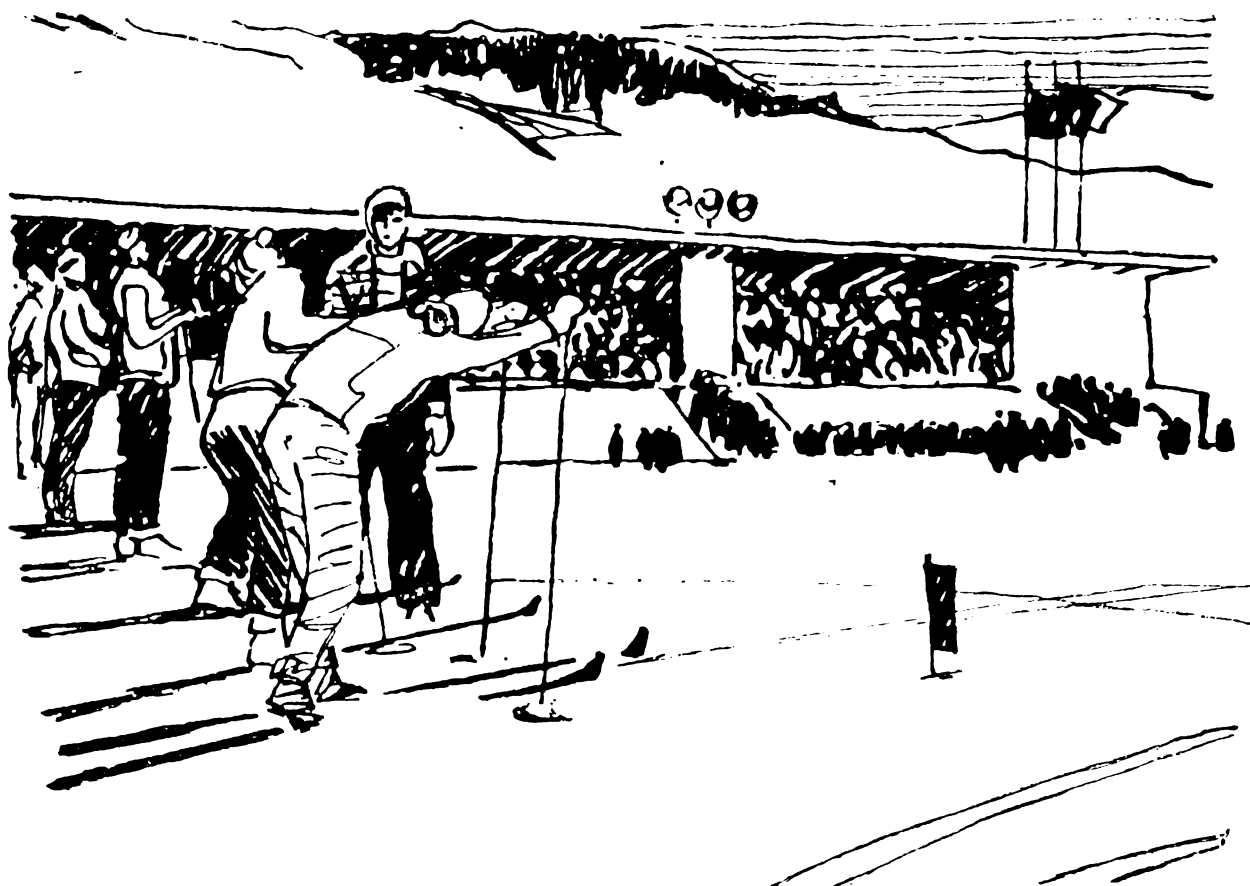
The air sparkled. A gay radiance encompassed everything on that frosty Ural day, making things scintillate like crystals in the low rays of the winter sun.

In the central box occupied by the mayor, members of the U.S.S.R. Sports Committee and newspapermen, I caught sight of the inevitable Remizkin, looking even more excited and flustered than usual. He kept changing seats, interviewing, hastily making notes in his pad, bending over it so low that he seemed to touch it with his nose, clicking his camera and on the whole making a great show of activity.

The row below the box was occupied by the children from the boarding-school. Taisya Valeryanovna was with them. Their hoods kept popping up and down all the time. Poor Taisya Valeryanovna had her hands full keeping the children in their seats and preventing them from running to the ski track. I caught sight of Katyusha but there seemed to be no sign of Seryozha among the children.

Lower down, near the aisle, sat the Skuratovs—mother, father and son. Natasha had, of course, long ago gone off to the starting place. Near the Skuratovs, I espied, were the little barber and beside him Aunt Lipa, whose great bulk distinguished her among all others.

I took my place at the microphone in a small glass booth which afforded a splendid view of the stadium and the surrounding country. I could even see a good part of the snow-blanketed plateau across which ran the ski track marked by tiny triangular flags. The track, as is usual for such races, ran in a circle, part of it stretching between the stands and



the skating-rink. In front of the central box was the starting and finishing line.

Placing a flask of hot tea within reach, I began speaking into the microphone. Loudspeakers carried my announcement to all parts of the stadium that the final run would begin in a minute, the women's ten-kilometre race which would determine the fate of the Crystal Cup.

Raduga was only seven points ahead of Mayak. And it was clear that the next few minutes would decide the day for the teams, as well as for individual contestants.



Chudinov, walking down the aisle from the central box, gave me a wink and waved. In reply I clasped my hands over my head and shook them. Stepan nodded. This was an old conventional sign meaning that I wished him victory.

Meanwhile the girls were lining up at the start—the thirty-six best skiers in the land. They were warming up before the start, some crouching low on their skis, others jumping, or, without bending their knees, bringing their hands down to touch their ski bindings. The favourites, among them Natasha Skuratova and Masha Bogdanova, were at once spotted and cheered.

The umpire raised his checkered flag, holding the flagstaff with one hand and a corner of the cloth with the other.

Alisa, as was her custom, was the last to make her appearance. It was a trick of hers. She—U.S.S.R. ski champion, invincible, confident, famous—liked to keep spectators in suspense. And now when she appeared there was such commotion and hand-clapping.

After taking a short run, Alisa seemed troubled. She crouched down and began sliding on one foot to see the effect. Tyulkin was at her side.

“Are you sure you’ve made no mistake about the wax?” Alisa asked him in a whisper. “Did you get the right kind for this frosty weather, and did you consult Korotkov on the matter?”

“You need have no fear on that score,” Tyulkin replied promptly. “I got the best wax, special mixture for frosty weather.”

The skiers were starting out in pairs. The umpire gave the signal to start and instantly the first pair went gliding down the course.

Natasha and Alisa paired off in the race. That they would was known the day before and added to the general excitement. These two principal contestants were among the last pairs. And when the umpire at last waved his flag and they plunged ahead they were wildly cheered by the spectators. They had started out shoulder to shoulder and went on and on like that for some time.

The route was a difficult one, winding among the hills and hollows—a severe test even for the hardest trained runners. Going far beyond the outskirts of Zemogorsk, it formed a ten-kilometre ring which came to a close at the central box of the stadium. All of the preceding week the Zemogorsk girls as well as the visiting competitors, including Alisa, of course, kept training along that track and studying its peculiarities.

At each lap a control judge was stationed to see that the rules of the race were not broken. They were connected with the stadium by telephone and their reports were at once communicated to me. Thus I was

able to keep the spectators informed of the progress of the race far out on the run.

As I watched Natasha, it seemed to me that she had not set herself a good pace at the start while Alisa had at once swung into a racing speed and was now getting ahead of Natasha. Soon the distance between the two skiers was quite noticeable. But it did not seem to worry Natasha. The spectators urged her on, stamped their feet, screamed, shouted advice. But she went on at her steady, well-measured pace. Compared with her, Alisa, who was getting farther and farther ahead, seemed much nimbler and fleet of foot.

Tyulkin walked up to the stands and sat down near my booth. I could see that he was extremely excited for he was rubbing his hands, wagging his head and chuckling, apparently in anticipation of the triumph which he was certain Alisa would score. He caught sight of Chudinov walking up the aisle, rose and went to meet him.

"Well, Stepan, be honest, whom do you root for?"

"You!"

"I'm serious," Tyulkin looked hurt, "is it Alisa for old times' sake or Natasha to be in with the local fans?"

"I repeat *you*," said Chudinov, "because things'll be pretty hot for you if Alisa loses."

The girls had completely vanished from sight, and would not be seen again from the stands for some time, for the course now ran on the other side of the hill. Presently I was informed that Alisa and Natasha were getting ahead of others. Alisa had passed two skiers who had preceded her at the start. Natasha was also pressing fast ahead but the distance between her and Alisa was not diminishing. The control judge at the turn of the second kilometre reported that Alisa had extended the gap.



"I told you Alisa would get ahead of them all," said Tyulkin triumphantly.

"You don't have to tell me that, that's what Carichev is saying right now to everybody."

"But what I tell you now is, think of old times and root for Alisa. Before it's too late. Where are you going?"

Chudinov made some sort of a sign to me and began running down the steps, shouting to Tyulkin from the aisle.

"I'm off to the track. I'll meet them at the seventh kilometre!"

I saw him run to an aerosleigh waiting for him at the stadium entrance. A pair of skis were fastened to its side. Chudinov shouted something to the driver and waved his hand. The motor was set roaring, clouds of snow rose into the air and off went the sleigh. I saw it go up a slope over which spread the stands of the stadium, cross a snow hollow, and disappear behind a copse.

The control judge at the second kilometre reported a somewhat changed picture to me. Alisa was slowing down. She seemed to have reached the limit of her strength and Natasha was now gaining on her. He also told me that Alisa seemed nervous and kept looking down at her skis.

"Attention!" I shouted into the microphone. "Report from second kilometre says Alisa Baburina was clocked in first here too. But she has slowed down considerably. Evidently she can't keep the killing pace she has set herself. Natasha Skuratova is catching up."

The uproar this announcement created drowned out my voice.

Drizhik was delighted.

"I tell you she'll beat that Moscow girl," he cried.

On hearing this, Tyulkin winked to himself: "The fellow thinks I don't know his secret," he seemed to say. "Well, I saw to it that Alisa got his wax."

Meanwhile a drama was being enacted right on the course. Natasha was now close behind Alisa going with great ease. Alisa was feeling great alarm—something had definitely gone wrong with her skis. They refused to glide, the snow was sticking to them and getting lumpy. To press forward was almost impossible.

"Make way!" she heard Natasha's voice behind her.

Alisa glanced back over her shoulder, making vain spasmodic attempts to advance.

"Make way!" the voice rang now masterfully right in her ear, and Alisa was compelled to sidestep from the route to obey it. Natasha passed her without as much as a glance in her direction.

The control judge was shouting into the mouthpiece:

"Alisa Baburina seems tired out. She keeps pointing to her skis. Something must have gone wrong there—evidently the waxing."

Quickly I switched off the microphone, and a green signal flashed

above it. I jotted down a few words and then switched on the microphone, the green signal changing to red. I announced that Natasha Skuratova was ahead of Alisa Baburina.

The stadium shook with applause.

"Alisa Baburina seems to be having some trouble either with the wax or her ski bindings," I reported.

At this point Tyulkin slipped quietly into my booth. I switched off the microphone and explained that he may speak to me now when the signal was green but not to make a sound when it was red.

"Not a sound, d'you understand?" I said.

Tyulkin nodded hurriedly and even screwed up his eyes a little. For a minute or so I listened with my earphones on to reports from the run. Then I made Tyulkin a sign to be silent, pointing to the red signal and spoke into the microphone.

"According to reports from the run, Alisa Baburina, U.S.S.R. champion, has slackened her pace considerably. Other skiers are beginning to gain on her. . . . Hear that?" I said to Tyulkin when the green signal came on. "Alisa'll soon be out of the game. Was it you who waxed her skis?"

Tyulkin was so annoyed that he banged his fist on the table and said, "Natasha Skuratova herself gave me the wax. She did it on purpose. I've been fooled and I thought. . . ."

The instant the words were out, he clapped his mouth shut putting both his hands over it. Horror was written on his face as he motioned with his eyes towards the microphone, over which the red signal was burning bright. Tyulkin's banging the table apparently connected the microphone. Hastily I switched it off. But it was too late—the damage was done already. I saw that the spectators were in a state of terrible agitation. There were some who kept springing to their feet and shaking their fists in my direction. Natasha's father was on his feet too.

"I'll never believe that!" I heard his voice when I opened the door

of my booth to let Tyulkin out. "Say what you may, but I shall never believe Natasha capable of a thing like that, never!"

As I learned later my conversation with Tyulkin had been overheard not only at the stadium, but on the route too. Chudinov heard it over his earphones in the cab of the aerosleigh. He gripped the driver's shoulders.

"Turn to the third kilometre," he shouted. "Please hurry, old man. Full speed!"

The driver set the motor going at its fastest. The speedometer was showing eighty kilometres, then, oscillating a little, swung to ninety.

Bending back towards Chudinov, the driver raised his voice above the roar of the motor and shouted in his ear, "Can't get to the ski course, there's a copse in the way!"

"Stop then!" Chudinov cried.

The sleigh whirled round to a halt. Chudinov jumped out, seizing the skis tied at its side. Before him spread the mirror-like surface of a frozen lake. A lad in a wadded suit was pottering round an ice-yacht.

"Say, friend!" Chudinov cried running up to him. "Can you get me across quickly?"

The lad nodded.

Chudinov sprang into the boat and was swiftly scudded across the lake. The wind tautened the sails to almost breaking point and was tearing fiercely at the flagmast. Going at great speed, the boat seemed to emit sparks. The ringing of the ice and the howl of the wind were quite deafening. Chudinov soon reached the opposite bank, jumped ashore, thanked the lad, hastily donned his skis and slid off along the narrow path. He went hurtling down a steep slope and disappeared among the trees of the copse. The lad watched him with delight and admiration. That was alpine skiing of the highest class!

Emerging from the copse, Chudinov plunged down a descent. He

cut a sharp corner, took a leap into the air and when he landed on flat ice felt a sharp pain in his knee joint. He dropped down on the snow, gripping his knee. It was with great difficulty that he rose and made for the ski track. A narrow-gauge railway connecting the mines with the local stone quarry obstructed his path. Carefully he crossed the sleepers. It was still quite a distance to the third kilometre and with each step the pain in his knee was getting more and more unendurable.

Yet he pressed on. Soon Natasha came in sight, sweeping down the run with broad easy steps. From the distance he could see distinctly the number 32 on her chest. Oblivious of everything, even the pain in his knee, he dashed on. Making a turn he swung into line with her. Natasha was going so fast she seemed to be soaring over the ground. She was pressing ahead at a killing pace, each thrust of her arms sending her skis far forward and precipitating her on and on. She beamed happily when Chudinov joined her. He had met her on the run much earlier than he had promised. He would say something complimentary to her now, she felt.

But Chudinov, racing alongside, demanded truculently, "What sort of stuff did you give Alisa yesterday to wax her skis?"

Without slowing down Natasha replied, "I gave her the best wax I had, you saw yourself."

"Then why is she having trouble with her skis?"

"I'm not going to worry about that. You can, if you wish," Natasha flung the words at him indignantly and dashed on ahead.

Chudinov had a hard time keeping pace with her.

"She's got the same wax I used."

"The same, you say? But the whole stadium is in an uproar and it's come over the air that you had deliberately given the wrong wax to Alisa."

Natasha came to a sudden halt, her skis cut edgewise into the snow and stood across the path facing Chudinov.

"What? The wrong wax?"

Chudinov halted, too.

He spoke hurriedly, "You didn't? I believe you. Then help her to rewax her skis. That's my advice." He pulled his stop-watch hastily out of his pocket.

"Time is dear but honour is dearer. You'll make up for the lost time."

"Make way! Make way!" the words of the skiers behind them now sounded nearer and nearer.

Two girls of the Raduga team passed Natasha. Alisa was coming up behind them too. Natasha and Chudinov without a moment's hesitation, both ran towards her. Alisa moved with difficulty, shuffling her skis which were now heavily padded with snow. There were tears in her eyes when she saw Natasha and Chudinov approaching.

"I trusted Tyulkin and now I've been deliberately given the wrong wax."

Fuming, Natasha was ready to pounce on the other girl. But she controlled herself, and, bending down, began pulling the skis off Alisa's feet.

"You're talking nonsense. Quickly wax your skis!"

Alisa merely stared at Natasha, understanding nothing.

"Where am I going to wax them, and with what?"

"Don't waste time talking," Natasha said. "I've got some wax on me, here it is! Get busy, quick!"

"I'm behind as it is," said Alisa on the verge of tears.

"How many seconds have we lost?" Natasha asked.

"Fifty-two," replied Chudinov looking at the stop-watch. "Hurry!"

"All right," said Natasha who had got Alisa's skis off. "We'll have to rush when we're through for all we're worth. And don't think I'm going to let you get the better of me. We're not going to lose the cup because of you. Step aside please, Comrade Chudinov, or they'll say we're breaking rules. There's a control judge looking this way."

She scrubbed the snow off Alisa's ski with her nails. After smelling it she said, "The skis have been smeared all right—with, if I'm not mistaken, Drizhik's face cream. And Tyulkin either took it by mistake or because he thought he was being extra smart."

Natasha got out a little bag which she wore round her neck, cut off a slice, breathing on it so it wouldn't freeze in the cold air, broke it, and gave one of the bits to Alisa. The girls set to waxing the skis as fast as they could.

"We must work as quickly as hunters," said Natasha. "The way Father taught me. We wear the wax next to our bodies to keep it warm. I suppose we're out of all schedule."

"Hurry!" Chudinov was counting the seconds. "Thirty seconds. Thirty-five. Alisa, we'll never win the cup if you fuss like that. Forty. Quick!"

One of Mayak's girl skiers passed them. Puzzled by their actions, she looked back and was even on the point of stopping.

"Don't stop! Go on!" Natasha and Chudinov shouted simultaneously.

The watch kept ticking and the second hand jerking slightly was describing its circle.

"Forty-five," Chudinov counted, "Forty-seven. Oh you slow-pokes, get on!"

When the waxing was done, Alisa quickly fasten-



ed the bindings. She took her first step—what a difference! And like a bird gaining its freedom, she plunged forward without a word of thanks to Natasha. The latter, indignant, turned to Chudinov.

“She’s right, no time to waste, every second is precious.” He prodded her in the shoulder. “We’ve lost more than one and a half minutes, and you’re again slow in starting. Step on it!”

Natasha glided down the run.

“Forward! Get your pace!”

“I’ll never gain on her now,” Natasha flung back over her shoulders.

“Yes, you will—if you lose your temper!”

When Natasha dashed off after Alisa, Chudinov took several steps forward to get a good start and followed the girls. But the pain in his knee joint was so sharp he could hardly move. His knee seemed to be rent in two by it. With a moan he fell, his hands clutching the painful spot.

CHAPTER 18

THE FINISH

The control judge reported to me all that had taken place at the third kilometre of the course. But he had omitted to mention Chudinov’s fall because he had not seen it. Chudinov had been going down a slope hidden from the judge’s view when he collapsed. I lost no time in relay to the stadium that Natasha Skuratova had stopped on the run and had generously helped Alisa Baburina to rewax her skis, doing it with real hunter’s skill. But that, I informed the spectators, enabled two of Raduga’s skiers to get ahead of both Natasha and Alisa. The Raduga girls, who had almost no chance, were now winning the Crystal Cup.

It is hard to describe the effect these words produced. The entire

stadium was seething. And, of course, the little hoods kept dancing up and down above their seats.

The children were greatly disconcerted about the incident at the third kilometre.

"Tell us, Taisya Valeryanovna, why had Natasha stopped, won't the others get ahead of her?" they asked.

Taisya Valeryanovna did her best to comfort them. Little Katya's head was bent towards her. She raised it by pulling at the tip of Katya's hood.

"There was nothing she could do but stop," she explained. "It was a matter of honour. Do you understand that?"

"I understand that quite well," Seryozha put in. "She was right in acting the way she did. And I'm sure she'll get ahead of the others."

Natasha's father scratched the back of his head under his fur cap.

"She did the right thing, saved the good name of the family. Now she must get ahead of that Moscow girl. If she doesn't, it'll be a disgrace."

"She's not likely to get ahead of her. After all she's the U.S.S.R. ski champion," said Savely.

The mother was shaking her head.

"See Natasha, my dear, you don't pay dearly for that!"

"Stop wagging your tongue," her husband said sharply.

Going down the aisle from the stands, the disgraced Tyulkin ran into Drizhik. The barber bore a look of anxiety.

"You, fool!" Tyulkin scowled. "Do you call that mixture of yours wax? Here, take it, and go to the devil with it."

He drew the jar with the mixture out of his pocket and flung it angrily at Drizhik's feet.

The little barber retreated with dignity.

"First, I'll thank you to behave yourself," he said, "and second,

that was not ski wax at all but my well-known skin cream against frost-bite, to be used outdoors in low temperatures only."

Tyulkin gasped. You could have knocked him down with a feather.

"And I find your behaviour so wanting in civility, that..." the barber went on and, without finishing his sentence, took out of his pocket the pen-knife Tyulkin had presented him with. He opened it and took a step towards Tyulkin, who drew back in horror.

"Go easy, go easy there!" he begged.

"If I'm not mistaken this is your knife," said the barber very calmly. "Well, I might as well tell you that the blades are rusty and the corkscrew got stuck in the first bottle I tried to open. Here, take it!"

He wanted to throw the knife down on the ground, but had accidentally caught at one of the blades and it clamped down on his finger. The pain made the little barber shriek, bound up into the air, and quickly drop the knife.

How fast the two contestants went covering kilometre after kilometre of the long circular route, each bringing them nearer to the finish! I relayed the reports that kept pouring in from the various laps of the distance. They were rousing greater and greater excitement among the fans. Alisa Baburina with Natasha Skuratova close at her heels had at the seventh kilometre of the run overtaken and left behind other contestants; they had regained the seconds lost and were showing splendid time now.

It was certainly a thrilling race! Ahead of the skiers now lay the eighth kilometre—a very difficult stretch full of obstacles, dizzy heights and sheer descents. It required skill in alpine skiing, the ability to top hills swiftly, to do quick christi. Natasha was at home in the mountains but Alisa was not. Where Alisa slowed down, Natasha could ski at top

speed. When it came to climbing a steep height, Alisa sweated over it but Natasha scaled it with the greatest ease, keeping the same steady pace. Now any moment it seemed Natasha would catch up with Alisa. But then the relief of the land changed and now one and a half kilometres of flat snow lay ahead of them.

Here was Alisa's great chance. She was famous for her speed in covering flat country distances. The two skiers now came into view. Alisa in front and Natasha immediately behind. But it was clear that Alisa was determined to keep the distance between them. She worked desperately with her sticks, thrusting them forward with great force. Natasha, however, pressed on at a swift resolute pace. I raised my field glasses and saw the two girls very distinctly. I longed to shout to Natasha, "Come on, be a good girl and get past her. Stepan hasn't been wasting his time on you, has he?"

I had no right to take sides publicly. I had to be impartial. I talked into the microphone and my voice came back to me from loudspeakers on all sides.

"Alisa Baburina," I announced, "is now making ready for the last stretch, a long leap that had many a time decided the day in her favour. But Natasha Skuratova, the young Zemogorsk skier, is right at her heels, showing amazing grit and splendid technique."

Through my field glasses I now saw that Natasha had gained on Alisa. I could tell by the way her lips moved that she was demanding that Alisa make way.

But Alisa would not give way. A skilled skier, she was now using cunning tactics. She still managed to keep Natasha at a very small distance behind her, preventing her from actually "stepping on her heels." She would thus be able to stave off defeat for a while and yet keep within the rules of the race. If Natasha was so anxious to pass her, let her do so by stepping off the track. And all the while she was pre-

paring for that last spurt of hers. On many previous occasions it had brought her victory. And she hoped it would now too save the day for her. She would spring it as a surprise on her rival, reach the tape before Natasha recovered from the shock and met the challenge.

The low winter sun was setting. And the shadows of the two girls gliding swiftly across the snows were long and bluish. The sun was now shining in their backs. Natasha's shadow preceding her was creeping towards Alisa's skis. It was getting nearer and nearer to the ski ends.

When at last Alisa made that famous spurt of hers, it was something Natasha had not counted on. She didn't expect her rival, who had seemed to be on her last legs, to muster enough strength for such a feat. Here it must be said in full justice to Alisa that at this last decisive moment of the race she was really superb. But Natasha was quick to meet the challenge. And, once again close on Alisa's heels, she could not help admiring the champion's vigorous pace and her determination to win. No wonder Chudinov had kept warning her of Alisa's skill. Alisa was an experienced runner who knew how to get the most out of every muscle towards the finish of the race.

To keep the killing pace set by Alisa, Natasha had to exert every bit of her remaining strength. I could tell that by the expression on her face which I watched through my field glasses. From what skiers told me after many a race, I could well imagine the state Natasha was in at the moment. What she longed for most of all was for the race to be over—for the end to come at last. It seemed to her that she was wrestling with time, that with all the strength that was in her she was precipitating herself into the stream of moments fiercely sweeping towards her. But that was an illusion created by her own swirling speed. She already saw herself beyond that desired goal: she had broken the tape and crossed the blue shadow cast on the snow by the

arc at the finish. She was already there in her imagination because she had an overpowering desire to be there. But her legs were not there yet and she had to get them there with lightning speed and—break the tape and cross that shadow on the snow.

At the stadium the spectators had risen to their feet as one man. Natasha's little pupils were yelling and shouting at the top of their voices. Seryozha's voice could be heard above the others. He was stamping with his feet and bouncing up and down.

"Come on, teacher! Beat her!"

"Natasha, my little girl, just one last effort!" her mother shouted.

"Daughter, don't bring shame on me. A little more speed!"

The stadium was in an uproar. Seryozha jumped into the air and in his excitement was pounding the back of the man in front of him with his fists. The man paid no attention.

I could see how much it cost Alisa to keep that distance—ever so small now—between herself and Natasha. She pressed on faster and faster, eager to be the first to break the tape.

But Natasha was no less eager. They were now approaching the finishing line. Refusing to let Alisa win the race, Natasha crouched low on her skis and spurted forward as Alisa had done. The stadium cheered wildly. She had swung forward on her sticks with all of her weight and was soaring in the air. And that leap brought her shoulder to shoulder with her rival. The finishing line was only a few yards away. They reached it and broke the tape abreast of each other.

I shouted all this into the microphone, but my voice was drowned out by the general uproar. The race ended with both girls winning the U.S.S.R. ski championship. Soon they were lost in a crowd of cameramen, newspaper reporters and sportsmen. Donat Remizkin, slipping in and out of the crowd, was trying to photograph the two

girl champions over the heads of those who blocked his way. The band struck up a flourish.

"Attention!" I said into the microphone after gulping down a glass of mineral water and mopping my moist forehead and my neck under the collar with a handkerchief. (The race had been a hot one for me too!) I cleared my throat. "Attention! The women's ten-kilometre race has ended in a victory for the two principal contenders to the title—Alisa Baburina of Mayak, Moscow, and Natasha Skuratova of Mayak, Zemogorsk. Both have shown splendid time, tallying to a fraction of a second, 38 minutes 2 seconds. Alisa Baburina, holder of the U.S.S.R. title for several successive years, had never before shown such good time. In today's race she had to strain every nerve and muscle, display all her technique to stand her ground against Natasha Skuratova, the young Ural skier, who has made a brilliant showing, keeping a splendid pace all through the race and revealing first-class technique. Irina Valayeva of Kirov, Raduga, came second, Masha Bogdanova of Zemogorsk, Mayak, another skier who made a very good showing, was clocked in third. And so the Crystal Cup goes to Mayak."

Before the two winners were surrounded by a crowd of admirers and reporters I saw Alisa stagger and almost fall on the snow. But she managed to clasp Natasha's shoulders for support, her arms hanging limp and the hands hardly able to clutch the ski sticks. Natasha, looking at her with eyes in which through the film of great weariness there yet shone the light of challenge, was herself too tired to push her off or to move away.

From sheer exhaustion they stood locked in that strange embrace, unable to tear away from each other as it often happens with boxers in the ring. Cameras clicked, flashlights blinded them and I could visualize that the captions in the papers would speak of the champions congratulating each other.

Gently but firmly Natasha at last released herself from Alisa's clasp. Erect as usual, and with her broad confident stride, she walked past the cheering crowd.

"Queen of the Snows!" someone shouted.

"Mistress of the ski track!"

What surprised me was the absence of Chudinov. He was not on the stands, not among the group of newspaper reporters and prominent sportsmen crowding round the finish. What had made him miss that moment of triumph?

And it was a great triumph both for him and his trainee. True, Natasha had not beaten Alisa, but she had selflessly helped her on the run and after that had tied with her. She had not let "the mighty Alisa," as she was called, beat her—they now shared the title of the U.S.S.R. ski champion.

You could see them mounting the victor's rostrum together, irreconcilable antagonists of a minute ago and now two champions, two sisters of glory. Amidst music they ascended the rostrum, over which waved the Mayak standard with a red tower emitting golden beams. The mayor of Zemogorsk, looking more imposing than ever, presented the Crystal Cup to Korotkov, representative of Mayak. And then came the command: "Alisa Baburina and Natasha Skuratova, U.S.S.R. ski champions, lower the flag!"

The two girls approached the red varnished flagstaff and simultaneously gripped the cord. Natasha flung back her head, gazing at the flag as it slipped slowly down the mast. Alisa, her hands working the rope, looked gloomy and preoccupied as she stared straight ahead. Now that the race and the ceremony were over, Alisa stretched her hand out to Natasha not for formality's sake as she did on the rostrum but on a sudden impulse and even somewhat awkwardly. She wanted

to say something, but her lips quivered and she could not utter a word. With averted face she moved away.

But Natasha's thoughts and eyes were elsewhere. What could have happened to Chudinov, she wondered. Her eyes searched for him everywhere. Meanwhile the youngsters from the boarding-school had come to her, slipping their arms around her and nestling close to her. On all sides she was surrounded by little hooded heads. Her father and mother approached, and Savely, too, had elbowed his way to her side. But Natasha continued to cast anxious glances round her and quite abstractedly let her mother kiss her cheek.

"And where is Chudinov?" she asked at last.

Five minutes later we were seated in an aerosleigh and speeding along the course of the ski race. We could now follow it and skirt the copse which earlier in the day had barred Chudinov's way to the third-kilometre mark. Sweeping along the ski course, the sleigh left behind a trail of sparkling snow powder.

When we finally reached the third kilometre, we found Chudinov seated on a mound, tying his handkerchief around his knee joint.

We heard strains of music. Chudinov sat not far from the control judge's post where there was a loudspeaker which meant that he had heard the results of the race.

The driver pulled up at the edge of a gulley. I jumped out before the sleigh had stopped and Natasha followed suit. Seryozha, who would not stay behind, tumbled out from the side of the sleigh, falling plop into the deep snow. Natasha darted towards Stepan, but I got ahead of her.

"Stepan, old man, congratulations!" I shouted. "We've two champions and the Cup."

Chudinov pretended he was mainly concerned with the pain in his knee.

"It's a pity I fell at the wrong moment. But now that my work is accomplished I don't suppose it matters."

Pushing me gently aside, Natasha dropped down on her knees beside him.

I realized I was in the way, so I rose and brushed the snow off my clothes.

Nevertheless I couldn't help seeing that Chudinov was peering tenderly into the face of the kneeling girl and that her eyes, though they looked weary, shone with gratitude.

"Thanks, Natasha," Chudinov said simply, and gently pressed his lips to the girl's hand which lay on his shoulder, and then put his cheek on it.

They looked in my direction. The snow had really got behind my collar and I meant them to see that nothing in the world at the moment interested me so much as raking out the little clammy lumps that stuck to the back of my neck.

"You don't blame me for not getting ahead of Alisa, do you?"

"Natasha," I heard Chudinov's voice behind my back—I was busy just then removing the snow from inside my boots—"Actually it is you who won the race. Everybody realizes that. But let me tell you, Natasha, that your days of skiing glory are still ahead of you."

"Still my time ought to have been better."

"Never mind the time. That's not what occupies my thoughts at present. You're a splendid girl and you have my thanks."

"It is you who should be thanked," Natasha said very softly. "If it hadn't been for you... I know it is you who saved..."

Oh, I thought, the old story coming up again.

Chudinov hastened to say, "I assure you there has been some misunderstanding. It was not I at all who got you out of the storm."

"That's not what I had in mind," Natasha interrupted him. "Don't you see that you've revived my faith in myself, made me go back to ski running."

"Natasha," Chudinov's voice almost failed him, "there is something else, something I've been yearning to tell you for a long time but have decided to put off telling it to you till after the meet."

"Again some new way of turning a corner?" Natasha teased.

"Let's forget about skiing for the present," Chudinov said, "I've had enough of that, Natasha, I..."

The rest of what Chudinov said was drowned out by the roar of the aerosleigh engine which the driver began warming up. When I turned to them, I saw Natasha's face beaming with happiness. By the movement of their lips I could see that they were still talking to each other. And though I could not hear what they were saying, I saw them look lovingly into each other's eyes.

The driver cut down on the gas. Someone was nudging my sleeve. It was Seryozha who had made his way across the gulley to my side. In his open hand, red from the frost, he held a football-shaped button.

"May I speak now?" he asked, his clenched teeth holding the mitten he had removed from his hand.

Quickly I covered his hand with my own and said, "Wait a while, Seryozha!"

Natasha helped Chudinov into the sleigh. When both of them were comfortably seated, Natasha looked apologetically at me, for now there was no room for a third person. I made a reassuring gesture. There was a roaring sound, the propeller began to whirl madly, describing a rainbow in the air. Seryozha and I were sprinkled with a coat of sparkling snow.

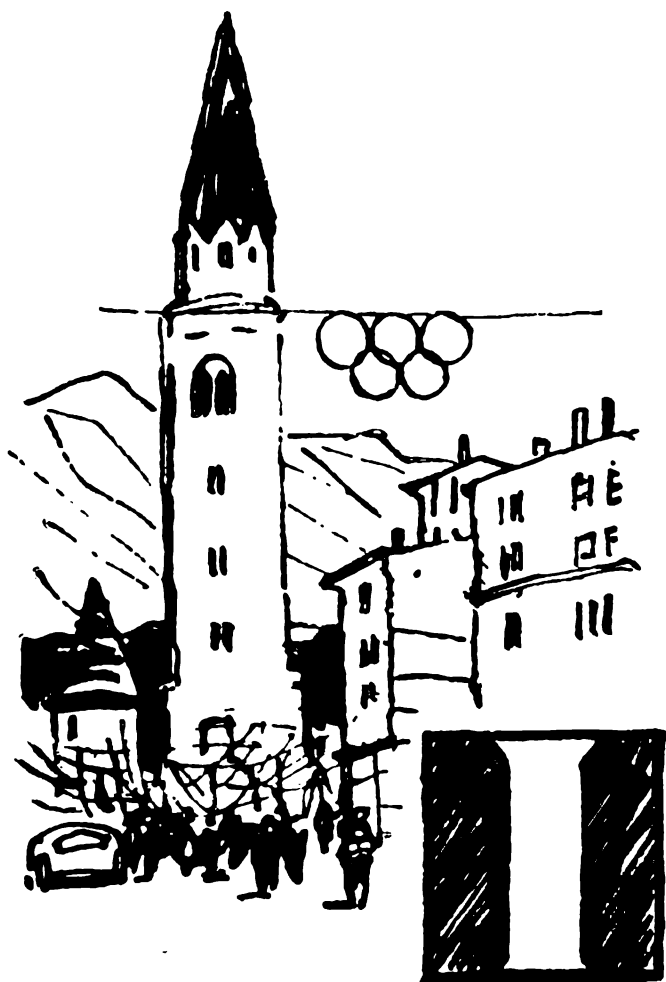
They swept away.

Seryozha was still holding out his hand with the button in it.

“Can’t we talk about it now, you know you’ve promised. And now I don’t have to keep my word any longer for everything’s over, isn’t it?”

My eyes followed the silvery swirl of snow, rising towards the white horizon and scattering rainbow splinters in its wake.

“No, Seryozha, to my mind, things are just starting.”



E P I L O G U E

I boarded a train and was on my way to the White Olympics in Italy. Yevgeny Carichev's manuscript lay in my suitcase. I took it out and reread his story, more than ever intrigued by quite a number of puzzling points in it. Well, I thought, I would soon meet Carichev and he'll be able to enlighten me.

The Winter Olympics held in the snows of the Italian Dolomites are still, I am certain, vivid in the memory of most people. Hence there is hardly a need for me to dwell in detail on what we had seen there—on the smooth glittering ice of Lake Mazurina, on the mirror-like field of the Olympic Stadium in Cortina d'Ampezzo, upon the famous "Italia" jumping hill, and on the hillsides of the Dolomites where little flags marked the gates of the Giant Slalom and the ski courses.

My interest in what was taking place upon the snow-clad hillsides over which towered the sheer rosy peaks of the Dolomites, stretching



to the clear blue sky, was heightened by the expectation of meeting the characters of Carichev's novel. I half-expected, too, to find the answers to some of the things that baffled me when I read the manuscript. And I also looked forward to witnessing the events which I knew must form the substance of the last unwritten chapter of the novel.

It will be remembered that the winter of that year was an unusually snowy one in Western and Southern Europe. The vineyards of Italy and Provence lay buried under a deep white blanket. Blizzards swept over Europe. When we reached Rome, the Eternal City presented an uncommon sight even to the Italians themselves. The palms in the



gardens of Pincio and Borghese wore mantles of snow. A snowstorm raged above the stone buttresses of the Coliseum, the snow whirling and eddying over the ancient amphitheatre. In front of St. Peter's the monks were playing with snowballs. A spectral cloud of snow swirled amid the gloom of the Pantheon, penetrating through a round aperture into the cupola and melting there upon the ancient slabs, its brief existence emphasizing, as it were, the undying glory of the hoary walls around it. The water in the Venetian canals was frozen and the palaces along their banks, unreflected in the water, seemed smaller than usual.

The snow swept the roads of Europe. Motorcars were stranded.

And the newspapers which I read during my journey when our train was held up for hours by the snow-drifts proclaimed in jest that the Queen of the Russian Snows was herself hastening to the Olympics, trailing her white train through the lands of Europe.

It was Natasha Skuratova who was now known as the Queen of the Russian Snows. After the dramatic episode on the ski track at the Annual Winter Sports Tournament in Zemogorsk, when she shared the title with Alisa, Natasha represented the Soviet Union at various international ski competitions in Norway, Finland and other countries, invariably emerging the winner. In fact, Skuratova's fame had spread through Europe a year before the Winter Olympics in Italy. The press was lavish in its praise. She was called Queen of the Russian Snows, Tsarina of the Snowy Way, Mistress of the White Trail, Daughter of Siberian Blizzards, and what not.

But we had other things to worry us to pay too much attention to the high-sounding epithets the European press showered on Natasha. Held up by snow-drifts at almost every station, we cursed the blizzard and feared that because of it we might miss some of the important Olympic events.

We hoped, however, to arrive in time for the women's ten-kilometre race which promised to be very exciting. The closer we were to Cortina d'Ampezzo, the more keenly we felt the impatience with which this event was awaited at the huge Snow Stadium there. The newspapers that came our way carried photographs of Natasha Skuratova. Headlines screamed that the Queen of the Snows would now have to hold her own against some of the world's finest skiers. Alisa Baburina was also among the contestants. For a whole year after the meet in Zemogorsk she had stayed away from ski competitions but had recently staged a comeback and shown good time at an elimination contest in Kirov.

Fifty of the world's leading women skiers were taking part in the Winter Olympics. On the ski course winding round the Dolomites they would vie for the title of Olympic Champion, as well as for the laurel wreath of world champion. It had been announced by the International Ski Association that the Olympic winner would automatically become world champion.

Gungred—Baburina—Grandberg—Skuratova—Mikulinen—were the names of skiers which flashed in the headlines of the newspapers bought up at the stations by passengers hurrying to the Olympics. And again—Mikulinen—Gungred—Skuratova.

Provided by the famous "Chit" tourist agency, the long Pullman buses, which we boarded at the frontier station, rushed us along the mountain roads to Cortina d'Ampezzo, jostling and lolling us to sleep. Huge billboards flashed past. Some of these proclaimed the glories of nylons showing sinuous females with skirts raised high above their stockinged legs. A sombre six-pawed pup breathing flames of fire adorned a petrol ad. And then there was the inevitable Esso sign, telling all drivers that Esso would provide them with anything they needed in any corner of the earth and at any latitude.

Soon we were driving down the road over which hung five large coloured hoops representing the well-known Olympic emblem. The garlanded hoops began to appear more and more often and we knew now that we were nearing our destination. A young bearded alpino with a long plume in his green hat raised the barrier across the road. We joined the stream of automobiles heading for Cortina from all roads converging here, and along with thousands of other sports lovers were precipitated into the very heart of the grand cyclone sweeping over the Dolomite Alps.

As soon as our feet, numb from long sitting, touched the snowy ground we felt caught in that wild dazzling vortex.

The glint of the alpine snow hurt our eyes even through the sun-glasses which we put on as soon as we climbed out of the buses.

A gay international crowd, laughing, calling out in every known language, and singing songs unfamiliar to our ear filled the narrow, brightly decorated streets of Cortina huddling between the ancient belfry and the "yellow," "white" and "green" hotels. Long, sleek limousines with strangely shorn dogs of every breed sticking their muzzles out of the windows, pressed through the crowds. Flags of all nations fluttering in the air, emblems and sports standards, sunlit shop-windows, gay with souvenirs, bright buttons and badges worn by passers-by and gleaming on cars lent great vividness of colour to the street scene. Skis of every hue impaled in the snow-drifts ran in long rows along the kerb. Newsboys in crimson jackets and jockey caps shouted the latest Olympic news, repeating the names Skuratova, Gungred, Mikulinen and others over and over again.

Above it all, floating over the city and echoing in the mountains, sounded the measured indifferent pealing of the church bells. Three colours—the dazzling white of the alpine meadows, the flaming red of the mountain summits and the azure of the southern sky—dominated the scene. And these colours with their many hues played on the Olympic badges gleaming on the chests of those who clustered round our buses.

Here everyone was caught in the fever of collecting and exchanging sports pins and buttons—an amusing and exciting business. No sooner were we out of our buses than a crowd of young people—and not only young—rushed to us and began tugging at our lapels, explaining with the help of gestures that they were ready to start swapping operations. Things went fine. Evidently Soviet buttons and badges were in high favour. We hardly had time to remove our Intourist buttons, Soviet Agricultural Exhibition badges, Moscow University pins, and even the

New Year button of the Art Workers' Club, before eager hands took them up. In exchange little flags, wreaths and badges brought over from New Zealand, Reykjavík, Capetown, Newfoundland, and many other faraway places were pinned on our suits.

Despite the frost, the alpine sun shining high above the Dolomites felt warm against our cheeks. The transparent mountain air was wonderfully bracing. We found ourselves in the midst of an atmosphere of youth, camaraderie and friendly rivalry.

But we knew we must hurry. While we had been fighting our way through the snow-drifts, the Olympic flame was brought to Italy aboard a Greek warship, carried through the streets of Rome and across the Venetian canals, held aloft over the mountain passes by alpine snipers and brought down to Cortina for the opening of the Olympics. It flashed past in the hands of the skiers going down the streets of the little town, was passed on to the skaters on the rink of the Olympic Stadium and had been burning now high above the stadium for several days and nights.

The first ice-hockey matches had already been played, the slalom contests held on the slopes of the Tofana, and news of the victory of the Soviet skaters on Lake Mazurina in the mountains was swiftly spreading. The first red flags appeared on the Honour Board in the central square of Cortina. The women's ten-kilometre ski race was to be held shortly and everyone was looking forward to that important event in which Natasha Skuratova, our Queen of the Snows, would contend for the Olympic title, pitting her strength against the finest skiers of Europe and America.

Sportsmen and sports fans in bright-coloured blazers and slacks, crowding round our buses, at once fell to arguing heatedly with us about the outcome of the women's ten-kilometre race. Here, too, the names Gungred, Skuratova and Mikulinen sounded on all sides.

I had planned to see Carichev before the race. But the group of tourists with which I arrived in Italy took up quarters in a little mountain settlement, quite a long way from the Olympic Centre. The Soviet team, on the other hand, was accommodated at the Tre Croche, a hotel high up in the mountains and near the heart of things. And those who had seen the Soviet skaters and ice-hockey players in the rink at Cortina d'Ampezzo at once told us that one of the current sayings here was that the Russians attacked their antagonists at "three cross" high cavalry speed. Somehow this made me recall that in Carichev's novel Natasha's father had drawn three crosses on the jar of that special wax he gave his daughter on the eve of the meet.

And, by the way, on that very day I discovered that Russian waxes were a much discussed subject among Olympic sportsmen. Somehow they had got wind of the dramatic incident at the Zemogorsk race. In fact, when we arrived at the Olympic Centre we were bombarded with questions about it. The newspapers were full of it, describing the episode in great detail. There were also brief reports in the press that new kinds of wax had been invented in Europe and America. We were shown prospectuses advertising these new waxes. And yet talk of the secret recipes used in the Urals did not cease. One of the reactionary newspapers even went so far as to say that the secret wax was so guarded that the mountain roads leading to the Tre Croche Hotel were patrolled by Communist squads.

But there were few who believed these prevarications and the skiers and trainers of various teams kept flocking to the hotel where our sportsmen lived.

I went there too. I wanted to see Carichev but he was out, of course. In fact he seemed to be eluding me. At the hotel I was told that he had gone to the jumping-hill. I looked for him there but he had left for the Snow Stadium. When I got there I learned that Carichev had

hurried off to watch the bobsledding race. I rushed to the ice track, where the sleighs, steered by sportsmen in cork helmets, rattled by swiftly, only to be told that Carichev had gone to the stadium to watch the ice-hockey games.

In a word I could not catch Carichev—not before the memorable women's ten-kilometre ski race.

And that was really a Big Day!

From early morning thousands of skiers were seen hurrying to the Snow Stadium. There were among them people of every age, nationality and creed, all united by their love of sports—college students, financiers, film stars, Catholics, Republicans, Right-wing and Left-wing Socialists, cowboys from Oklahoma, sheep-breeders from Australia and seamen from Norway—all dressed in bright-coloured skiing suits. And all gliding along the track on red, blue, yellow or striped skis. Many took up places along the course to get a close view of the race.

Caught in traffic jams all along, our bus at last reached the stadium. Columns of gleaming motorcars of every trade-mark, chrome-plated and shining, with skis tied on top, were making their way to the stadium. Red, yellow and bright green buses, crammed with passengers, were also streaming there. Even the roofs and the luggage compartments were packed with people,—all of them holding skis.

"Austria's coming!" a man at my side said.

Skiing downhill in heavy stockings and in hats with small green plumes came the Tyrolese. Then came jeeps with young men in long jackets of fluffy white material with red loops and wooden buttons and red caps of nylon fur that made them look like Hussars.

"That's the Americans!" the same man informed me.

Waving their striped clubs and checkered flags the policemen, hoarse from shouting, were regulating traffic with great difficulty, now and then holding up the cars to give way to columns of skiers.

Crowds of spectators now filled the stands of the stadium to watch the women's ten-kilometre race. We were escorted to the Central Stand, evidently designated for guests of honour.

The flags of thirty-two nations participating in the White Olympics waved above the stadium.

In the press boxes typewriters clattered and the muffled voices of radio commentators speaking into their small microphones could be heard. The latter held the microphones pressed close to their mouths and from a distance it seemed as if they were munching Eskimo Pies and mumbling at the same time.

It was here that I at last caught sight of Carichev. He noticed me too, rushed down to the barrier separating the stands from the press boxes, bent over it, waved his hand to me and then pointed to his throat with his finger.

"Well, well, at last!" he shouted hoarsely to me. "I rang you up at the hotel. It's high time we met and talked things over. But. . ."

He was too hoarse to go on and broke into a cough.

I was on the point of saying something when he spoke again.

"We'll talk later," he said hurriedly. "I've just about lost my voice completely—from too much shouting at yesterday's hockey match between our players and the U.S. team."

Jumping over the barrier, he hurried to that part of the stadium where beneath the thirty-two flags the girls were preparing for their race.

I saw Carichev run up to Number 38, a tall, well-built girl. A look at my programme told me that it was Natasha Skuratova.

Raising my binoculars, I took a good look at her. She had a lovely, well-moulded face with a somewhat stubborn mouth pursed like a child's. Her cheeks flushed and the expression of her face was one of perfect calm, not artificial, but real and with something of a challenge in it. Her large wide-open grey eyes were grave under their long

curling lashes and shone with a steady, unflickering light. She did not look in the least bit nervous, and only her slanting eyebrows twitched slightly.

A tall man of athletic build in a fur cap and a long blue jacket with the letters U.S.S.R. on the chest approached her. Though limping a little, he walked very erect and his step was steady. He stepped up to Natasha Skuratova and put his hand on her shoulder, a gesture at once disciplinary and friendly, a typical one for the relationship that usually springs up between renowned Soviet sportswomen and their exacting coaches. Natasha turned her blushing face to him, which now seemed even lovelier, and her grey eyes grew kindlier and more radiant as they peered into his. Through my powerful binoculars I saw her give the hand that lay on her shoulder a surreptitious caress with her stubborn chin.

Almost at once I recognized the man as Stepan Chudinov whose pictures I had often seen in sports magazines. After exchanging a word with Carichev, who had approached them, Chudinov quickly bent down to examine the bindings of Natasha's skis. He then had her make a few movements to see that everything was all right, and stepped aside.

They were off.

The signal to start was given at intervals of 30 seconds and the skiers did not pair this time as they had at the Zemogorsk meet but started out singly. Up went the flag of the umpire, a thick-set Dutchman, and off dashed one of skiers past the stands and down the track. And each wave of the flag evoked wild applause and stamping of feet among the spectators. Cheers followed each skier long after she had glided away. Norwegians, Austrians, Italians, Finns and spectators of other nationalities were encouraging their sportswomen.

When the flag rose for the thirty-eighth time Natasha Skuratova started out on the run.

At the stadium the spectators had long been waiting for her to appear.

And now thousands of voices cheered the famous Soviet skier. Steadily gaining impetus, she went skiing at a broad, vigorous pace. Carichev is, of course, a much better hand at writing such things than I am, yet I, too, could see how her skis obeyed her every motion and how her pace grew swifter and more confident as her well-knit figure swept past the stadium. It was clear that she would soon develop a very high speed. She was going at the pace which Chudinov had taught her. Taking broad sweeping steps and thrusting with her sticks at full arms' length, she was precipitating herself forward with great vigour.

"A splendid pace, splendid!" experts whispered to each other.

"Faster! Go faster! Come on, Natasha, show it to them!" came from the Soviet sportsmen in their blue sports suits and fur caps in the stands.

"Na-ta-sha! Na-ta-sha!" scanned her fans.

Meanwhile, disappearing down the dips and reappearing again on the rises, Natasha was drifting farther and farther away from the stadium. Pretty soon she was lost to view in the far distance, blurred out by a film of slow-falling snow.

As at the Zemogorsk tournament, the changes of weather at Cortina were causing much anxiety both among the racers and spectators.

The day before had been very frosty and, as Carichev told me afterwards, Natasha, after consulting Chudinov, waxed her skis with her father's home-made frost-proof wax. Natasha had great faith in these old hunter-family wax recipes. But the morning had brought a sudden change of weather. Heavy clouds drifted low, rolling down the slopes of the Alps. It grew warmer. A mist was gathering and there was now a moistness in the air. The surface snow was thawing and forming a crust. Natasha's skis, waxed the day before, were now giving her trouble, slipping and throwing her off her balance. They had to be rewaxed. And to top it all, the wet snow that was now falling made it even harder to ski and roused alarm in the hearts of the fans.

The route was shaped like the figure eight. After covering five kilometres, the skiers turned and followed the course back to the stadium. This gave the spectators the possibility to see a good part of the race without having to depend on radio reports.

Besides, there was a huge scoreboard at the stadium, the size of perhaps a five-storey building. On it the spectators could follow the progress of the race; the skiers were represented by their numbers and the time shown by them on each lap was at once recorded on the board.

Excitement grew with every minute. The last skiers had crossed the starting line. One-fourth of the distance was already covered by the main body of competitors. All eyes were glued to the huge black scoreboard displaying the numbers of the ten skiers who had so far shown the best time.

Natasha Skuratova's number was not among them.

The Soviet fans at the stadium were greatly perplexed by this. I saw Carichev dash out of his box and run to the judges' stand.

The very next instant a curious thing happened: all the numbers on the scoreboard receded to the right, giving way to Number 38.

The stadium buzzed with excitement. Puzzled looks were exchanged on all sides. A rattling came from the loudspeakers and all fell silent. Three times and in three different languages apologies were extended on behalf of the judges for "a regrettable error." The error was due to the fact that for some reason the time shown by Natasha Skuratova for the first quarter of the distance had been wrongly reported by the control judge.

Soon an excited hum broke from the stadium when far in the distance among the pines appeared the figure with Number 38 on her chest. She reached a steep descent and, going headlong at a killing pace and vigorously thrusting her sticks forward, flashed down the flat ground towards the stadium.

Half of the distance was covered and in that time to the amazement of all Natasha had outdistanced at least twelve of the skiers who had started out long before her. Among them were skiers of international fame. True, almost simultaneously with Natasha appeared the little stocky figure of Mikulinen. Her number was 36. She, too, had outstripped the others and, crouching low on her skis in her characteristic way, was closing in on Natasha.

One after another the skiers swept past the stadium amidst shouts and cheers, dashing off to round the second five-kilometre circle of the "8." Next after Mikulinen, far ahead of the others, went Gungred. Alisa Baburina swept past behind her. She was showing good time and had outdistanced seven skiers who had started out before her. As I watched her nimble, quick figure vanishing down the run and admired her swift pace, I decided that Chudinov was unfair to her.

The uproar died down. The stop-watches in the hands of the judges and numerous spectators ticked wildly. The hands on the huge demonstration clock were moving on. The numbers and the figures showing time shifted from place to place on the scoreboard. Soon it would be known which of the ten leading skiers showed the best result after covering the first five kilometres.

In the first square topping the score was Number 38 and beneath it the figure 17—Natasha Skuratova's result so far. She had covered half of the distance of the run in seventeen minutes. Mikulinen, 25 seconds behind, now was her hottest rival. But Natasha's results seemed the best and the chances of winning the race ran high in her favour.

It soon appeared, however, that her results were not the best, for a moment later it was Number 44 that had got ahead of 38. And Number 44 was Alisa Baburina who, as it now appeared, showed the best time in the first half of the race—16 minutes 46 seconds.

Loud cheering alternated with moments of tense silence. We were

all so absorbed in the race that we had not noticed the clouds disappear and the southern Italian sky grow a deep blue. In the transparent atmosphere, above the snow-clad slopes of the Alps, rose the ruddy outlines of the Dolomite peaks. The world around was now gay and vivid with colour. It was as though Nature was preparing a fitting welcome for the winner of the race.

But the skiers running the race in this new bright hopeful world found that the change of weather was making skiing more and more difficult. Laymen were ignorant of such matters, but expert skiers knew only too well that the weather could work havoc.

It was just then that Natasha did something quite sensational in the eyes of the world sports press: she stopped in the middle of the race to rewax her skis. She did this in the manner of the Ural hunters taught her by her father whose emergency jar of wax she had brought along with her to the race.

When this was reported over the air, it caused a great stir at the stadium. The spectators were greatly astounded. To stop in a race like that, if only for an instant, and let your antagonists get ahead of you? Why, only a runner supremely confident in herself, one who felt she still had great reserves of energy, could risk a thing like that!

A hazardous move, this—taken by the Queen of the Snows. And as might have been expected Number 38 now shifted to third place on the scoreboard, giving way to Baburina and Mikulinen, and a minute later to fourth place. Mikulinen now led the race with Gungred her runner-up and Baburina in close pursuit.

I saw Carichev in the press box. He sat there looking pale, one hand clutching the barrier, and staring grimly into the distance where the skiers were expected to appear shortly.

The tense silence that set in at the stadium seemed to last for quite a while. Over our heads towered the orange-coloured peaks of the

Dolomites with tapering violent shadows playing in the gullies. A helicopter with observers, resembling a dragon-fly, hung motionless above the snow valley through which the course ran. Suddenly it veered and glided towards the flags of the stadium.

In three languages over the radio came the announcement that the skiers were now entering the last stretch.

Several of those who were the first to start now passed the stadium. They had lost the race, their time being far behind the few who stood a chance of winning. A minute or two passed and we caught sight of the principal contestants. First came Mikulinen who had many times before won the world championship, with Alisa Baburina a little behind her and Gungred third. The skiers had noticeably slowed down their pace, finding the heavy snow a great hindrance to their progress.

There was as yet no sign of Natasha Skuratova. Before long, however, the excited spectators saw a swiftly moving figure approach the hill. Natasha, changing from a broad sliding pace to a short springing trot, reached the top with amazing ease. The stadium watched her try to overtake the three leading skiers who were obviously fatigued by the ascent.

Before them the ground turned and fell away in a drop so sheer that the three skiers in the lead had to slow down their pace; they crouched low and steered carefully so as not to lose their balance, fearing to fall which was quite possible in such cases. But Number 38, as I could see through my binoculars, far from diminishing her pace was gliding down the steep descent at top speed. At a whirling pace she swung round the bend and, emerging on to the last lap, was now overtaking Gungred.

A moment later she was close on Alisa Baburina's heels.

Now there was only Mikulinen in front, her most dangerous antagonist who seemed quite out of reach.

"Come on! Come on, Skura-tova!"—we heard on all sides in all accents and all languages. "Come on, Skuratova!"

Mikulinen, breathing heavily and pressing feverishly ahead with all her remaining strength, was within a few metres of the finish when Natasha caught up with her and outdistanced her by half a ski's length at the tape.

Completely overcome by exhaustion yet still going full sail she fell into the arms of Chudinov who rushed to meet her, pressing her temples against his shoulder. He led her gently aside. And only after a little while was she able to raise her head and look wearily up into his face.

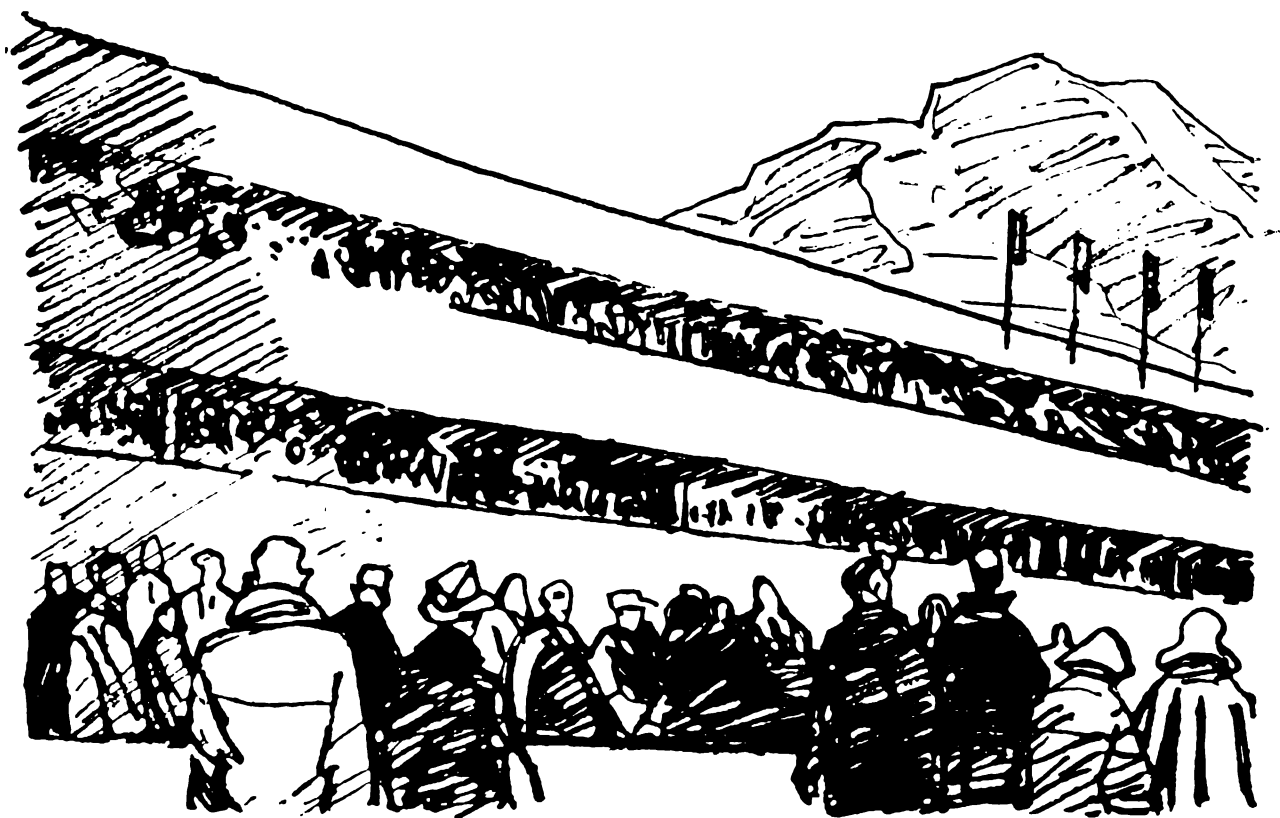
In the excitement we forgot that there had really been no need for Natasha to make that last spurt. She had started out later than Mikulinen and already a few minutes before the skiers were nearing the tape it was clear that she was the winner. But towards the end of the race Natasha thought only of being the first to break the tape.

Natasha's result in the ten-kilometre race was the best ever shown by any woman skier at the Olympic Games: her time was 36 minutes 10 seconds.

I caught sight of Carichev running down the aisle. A crowd surrounded Natasha. Hundreds of cameras clicked. I tried to elbow my way to her but couldn't.

In the evening eight heralds in plumed hats and green cloaks with crimson linings rose to the platform of the Olympic Stadium, again filled with spectators of all nationalities, and blew their trumpets. The closing ceremony began.

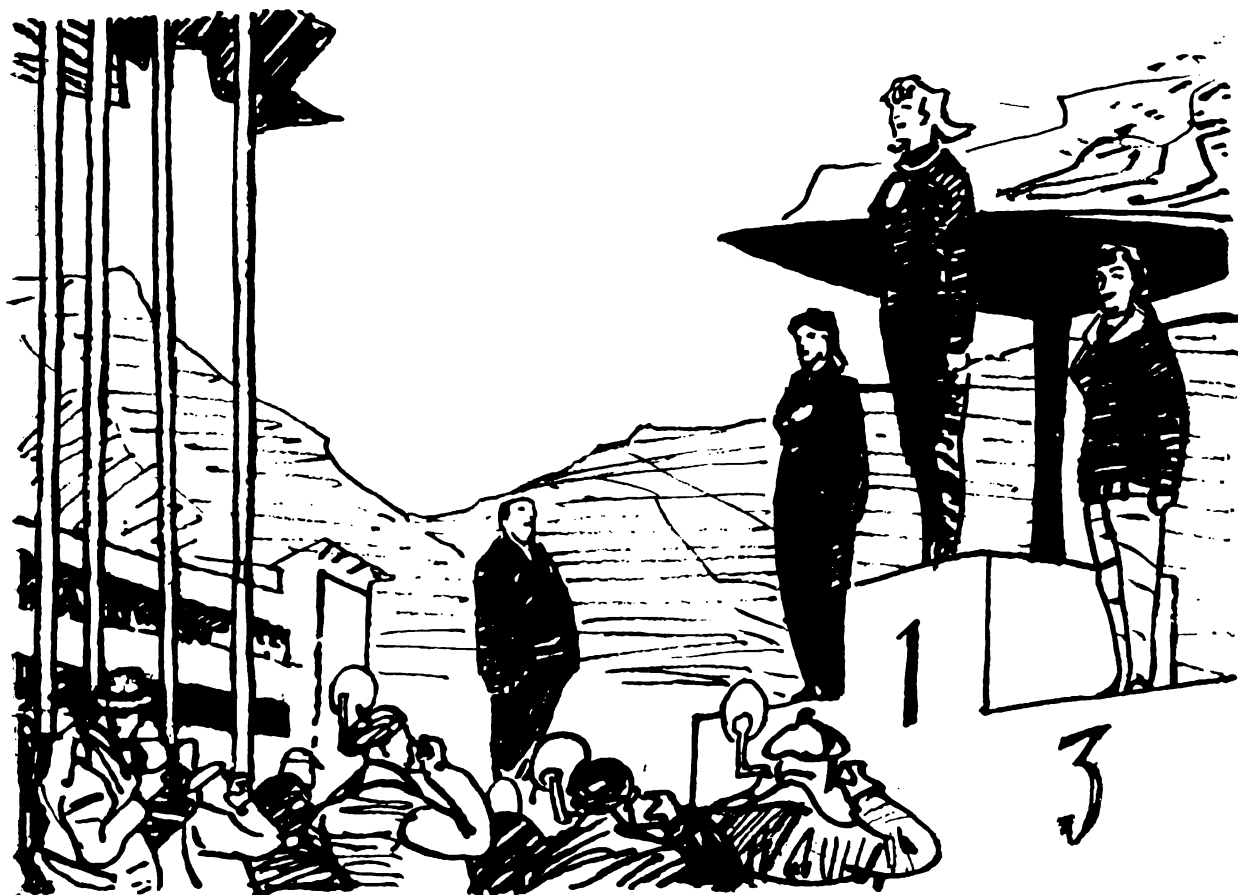
Searchlights criss-crossed the pedestal on which the Olympic flame had been burning for the last eleven days. The red flag was raised above the stadium, the wind sweeping majestically down its folds in



which above the hammer and sickle shimmered the five-pointed star. When the band began to play the National Anthem of the Soviet Union the spectators rose. Amidst great cheering and applause the president of the Olympic Committee handed Natasha Skuratova the Olympic medal. The cheers rang louder and louder and Natasha's name was scanned on all sides.

"Hurray! Hurray for Sku-ra-to-va!"

That same evening Natasha was crowned with the laurel wreath of world ski champion, and the representatives of the International Ski Association who came to the Tre Croche Hotel for the ceremony solemnly proclaimed Natasha Skuratova White Queen of the year.



At last I got a chance to speak to Carichev who took me to his hotel room as soon as the ceremony was over.

"Well, now that it's all over I can finish my novel," he said stretching himself contentedly.

"All you write is quite interesting," I said opening the manuscript and laying it before the author, "but in certain places you insist on being vague and actually keep things from the reader as in that snow-storm incident. After all the reader has a right to know who saved Natasha."

"Is it so very important?" asked Carichev. "I've related the incident just as it happened in life."

"Not quite!"

"Perhaps, but what of it? If the incident seems to be causing trouble, I'll just take it out. It's got nothing to do with the story. I thought I made Chudinov's character quite clear. Catch him owning up to a thing like that."

"Yes," I agreed, "Chudinov's character is quite well defined: he's not the man to take credit for something he hasn't done."

"What's that?" Carichev asked, pricking up his ears.

"I know exactly what happened."

"You do? Well, let's hear it then!" Carichev said defyingly.

"I know, old man, that it was you who discovered that pair on the night of the snowstorm."

Carichev was plainly amazed.

"Congratulations!" he mumbled. "A brilliant discovery that. So you've turned Sherlock Holmes? And how did you hit on such a bright idea?"

"Now don't you try wriggling out of it. The night you arrived in Zemogorsk you got stranded at the aerodrome because of the blizzard, didn't you? And, of course, when you heard the story about the young girl and the little boy getting lost in the snowstorm you at once dashed off to help find them. And you had the luck to be the first to come upon the pair. But when you discovered that Chudinov was among the rescue party and remembered that other little incident of long ago when he saved your life in Karelia but would not own up to it, you decided to follow his example. Chudinov's modesty had been weighing on your mind. Besides you were very anxious to bring Natasha and your friend together and what better than such romantic grounds? Well, to go on with the story, you returned to the hotel before Chudinov did."

"Supposing that's true, but what about the blazer and the missing button?" Carichev challenged me.

"That's easy enough to explain. Chudinov saw your blazer on the back of the chair and took it for his own. At the beginning of your novel, as you no doubt remember, you speak of a photograph in which both of you are dressed in identical foreign-made blazers. And so when Chudinov fell asleep, you put his own blazer in place of yours and, to add greater weight to the whole story, cut off that button. And, by the way, that was the button you returned later to Chudinov, while little Seryozha on the night of the snowstorm had got the button off your own blazer. And it was actually the existence of two missing buttons that made me suspect you. Then there was that mysterious mask at the carnival—that, too, was no one but yourself. And I must say that bit was done rather crudely. Well, and what do you say now?"

All the time Carichev listened to me, he tried to appear quite non-plussed.

"That's all very well," he now said, "but what about the scarf? There was Chudinov's initial on it."

I did not reply at once for I had completely forgotten about the scarf. I was somewhat confounded by this business of the initial. What the devil!—I thought. And suddenly the truth dawned on me.

"Give me a pencil for a minute. If you spell your names in Russian, the initials are different, but in Latin letters they are the same. And you bought these scarves in Switzerland, didn't you? And the Swiss use a Latin alphabet. The scarf you put round Natasha's neck on the night of the snowstorm was your own scarf. Now, what have you got to say?"

"All right, I give up," said Carichev raising his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Let's go downstairs now," he said after a pause. "This morning I promised Natasha and Stepan to introduce you to them. Only please not a word about that affair of the storm."

I shrugged.

“I don’t have to tell them anything. They know everything themselves. I’ve already met them. And it was from their words that I was able to piece together the whole story.”

Going down the stairs, we caught sight of Natasha and Stepan standing on the balcony, breathing the sweet mountain air and enjoying the peace of the starlit Italian night.

We did not hear them speak. After the hectic day which had ended in victory for both of them it was natural that they should long for quiet and the silent pleasure of each other’s company.

We left them to themselves.

Moscow—Cortina d’Ampezzo, 1956